

Written by **Kouhei Kadono**

Illustrated by Kouji Ogata

Boogiepop Missing

The Peppermint Wizard

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- Translating certain terms in the same way (Ex: Fire Witch, Imaginator)
- Keeping to traditional Japanese name order
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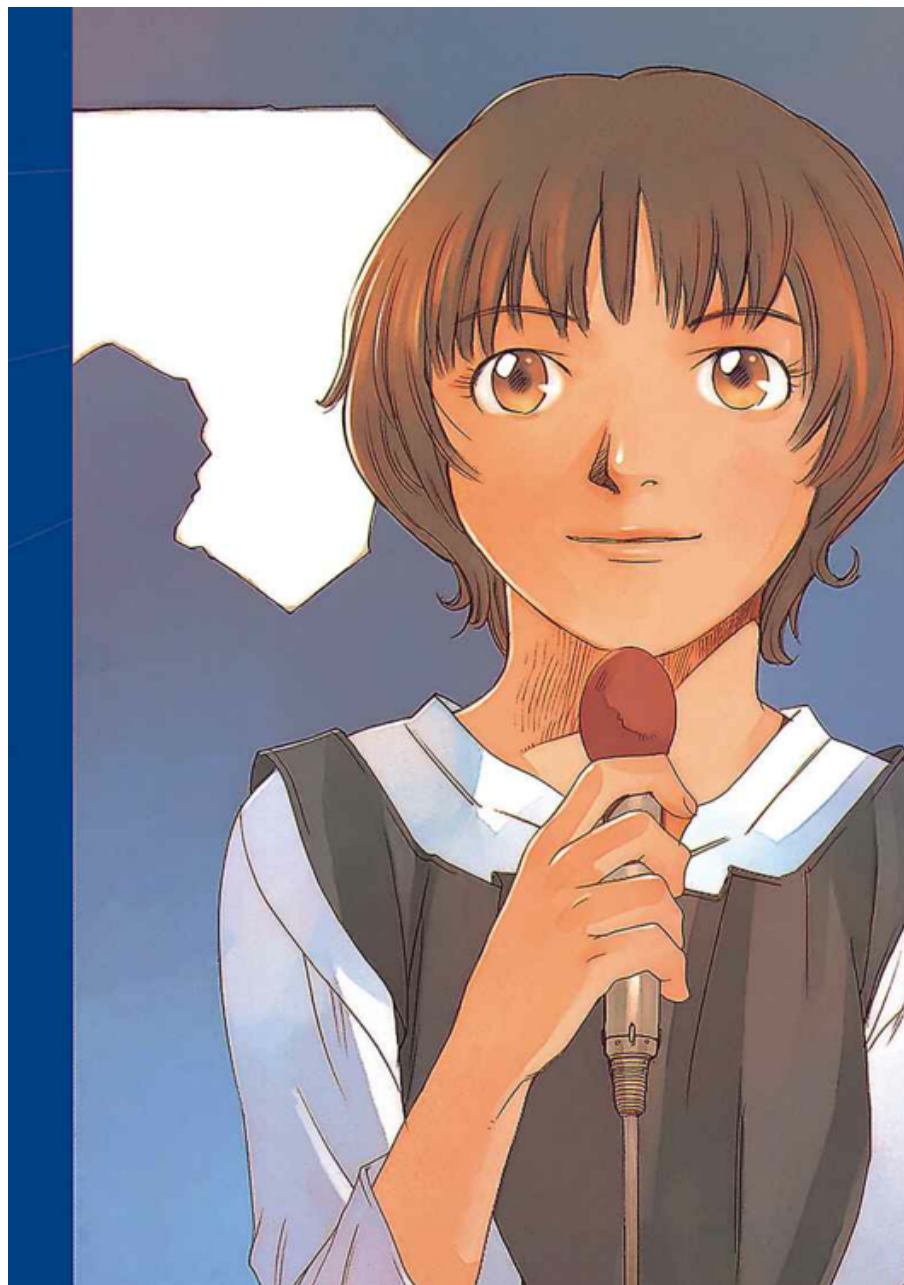
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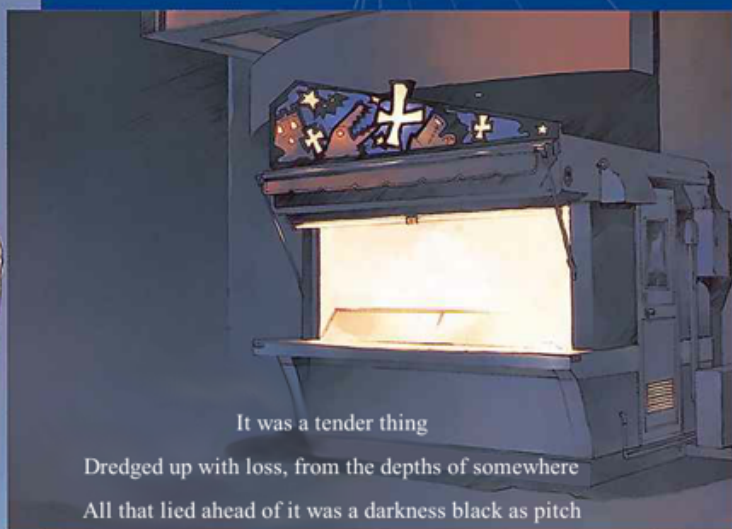
The Peppermint Wizard

Written by **Kouhei Kadono**

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Today, we're in front
of the shop that
everyone's been
talking about! Right
over here is the ice
cream stall that's
taking the town by
storm, and, as you
can see, this man's
staggering popularity
is making it hard for
him to keep up!

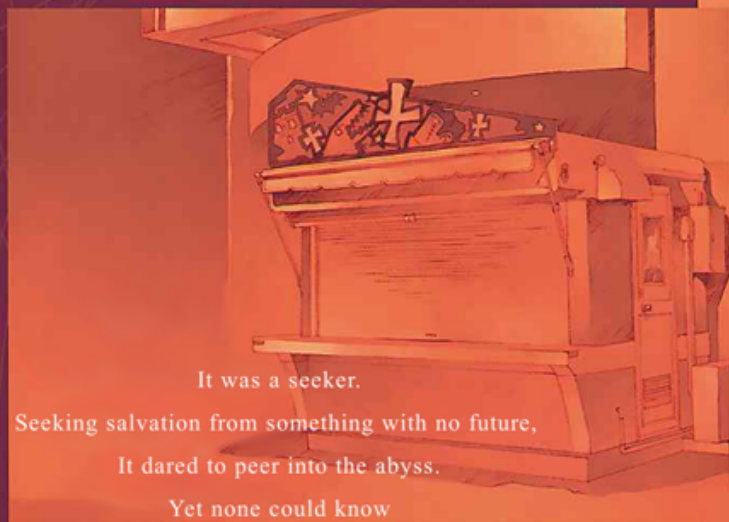


It was a tender thing
Dredged up with loss, from the depths of somewhere
All that lied ahead of it was a darkness black as pitch

The weight of the pain in it's chest...
All it could do was to be crushed into nothing.

.....
"It use to be really lively around here, but...
It's so loney now, like none of it ever happened."
.....

"It's pretty easy for people get swept up in a craze.
But people are just as quick to forget about it."

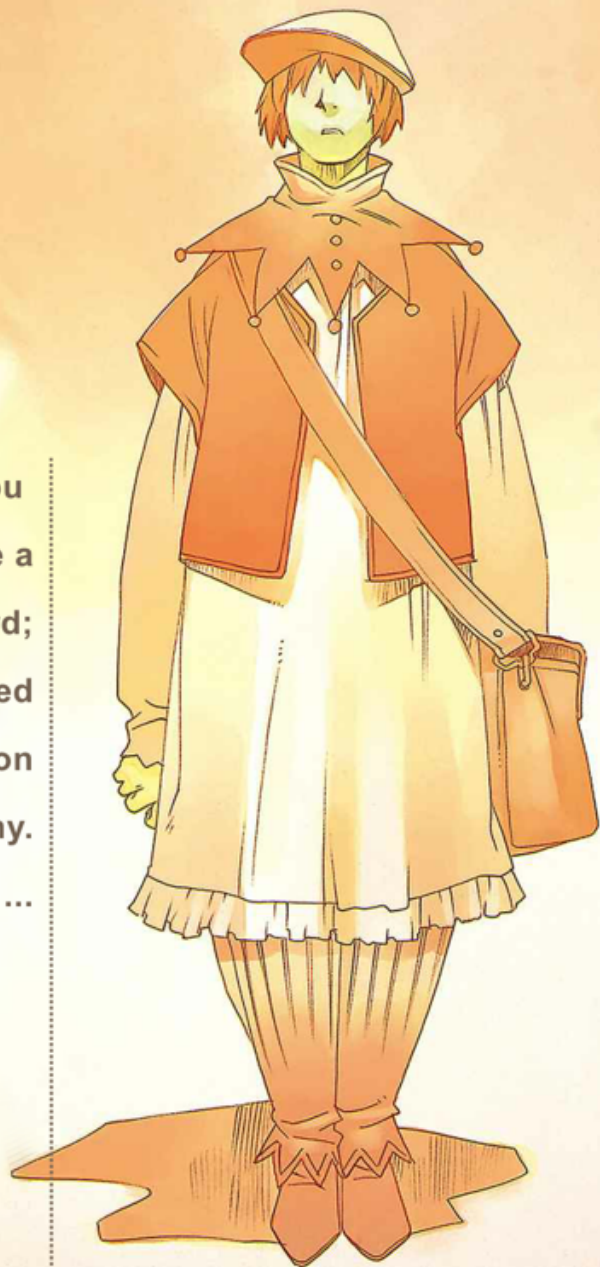


It was a seeker.
Seeking salvation from something with no future,
It dared to peer into the abyss.
Yet none could know
Of the futility of it's persuit
And how hollow the void was when it found it.

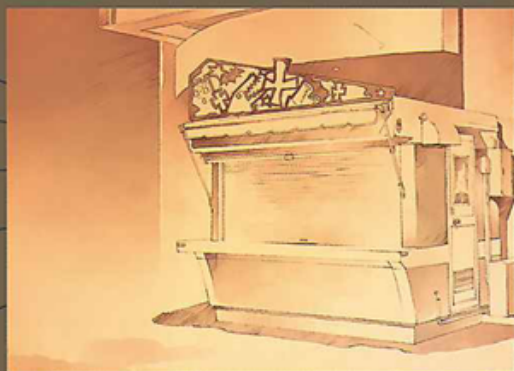


**You
are a
wizard;
a failed
creation
of destiny.**

...



...Even so, do you still want to hop in?



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Design / Yoshibiko Kamabe

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Afterword – “That” is not “Here.”

Translator’s Afterword

“Hey, Akio¹, I’m pretty sure that’s an I.C.E.”

“I... C... E... The hell does that mean?”

“Incomplete Error. Basically, they’re failures ‘cause they weren’t completed.”

“But, didn’t he have a ton of combative and destructive power. They even called him a “Super Build” or something.

“Just because they’re failures doesn’t mean that they’re not powerful. In fact, sometimes that power is exactly what made them a failure to begin with. Of course, sometimes it’s less about power and more about having a really bizarre ability no one’s ever seen before. Yeah, for example, there was actually one in your country at one point, and, while he was there, he...”

From “The Soldier of Ruin”

By the time Ritsuko had gotten home from school, her mother's expression was pale.

"Ritsuko, take that out. Now." Ritsuko stiffened at her mother's words.

"...T-take out what, Mom?"

"Don't play dumb with me. I know what you're doing. You're taking all that ice out of the refrigerator every day, right?" Her mother's eyes were sharp, and a shiver went down Ritsuko's spine. But even so, she protested.

"N-no, not really. Juice maybe"

"Juice, Oolong tea, whatever. None of it's been taken."

"Oh... well, that's cause—"

"Don't you always carry around that portable thermos? You're filling it with ice so that it doesn't melt. I'm right, aren't I?"

"....."

"It's in that sports bag isn't it?"

When her mom reached out her hand, Ritsuko panicked, and took the bag into her arms

"Y-you can't! It's all I have left" she screamed.

"What are you talking about? That stuff is poisoning you!"

"B-but it's not! They said so on the news!"

"Yes, they did, but it's clear that it can't be good for you, besides —"

"But you were happy to eat it all the time before, didn't you?!"

"Ritsuko, listen to what I'm saying!"

"No! Never!" Ritsuko turned around and broke into a run. But she was in the house, so her only option was to run up the stairs and into her room.

She shut the door and locked it right in front of her mother, who was following her.

"Ritsuko, Ritsuko! Open the door!" Ritsuko could hear her mother fervently knocking on the door.

For a moment, she sat in the middle of the room in a daze, cradling her bag, but, eventually, she pulled a thermos out from inside it.

With a trembling hand, she gripped the large silver cylinder.

“Y, Yeah... of course not, there’s no way it’s bad for me!”

She tried forcing the lid open so hard that she couldn’t open it properly. Her fingers slipped on the container’s lid again and again until, somehow, she managed to remove the contents. The small bag looked like it was suspended in ice water. It’d been there since early in the morning, so most of the ice had melted by now.

“.....!”

She put her fingers in the cold water and took out the bag with two fingers. It felt nice and cool. The bag was translucent, so, through it, you could see the faintly emerald green contents.

She awkwardly opened it.

The moment it was opened, cold fumes seemed to rise from the bag, but, of course, it was just her imagination. There was no way it was that cold.

Inside was a strikingly ordinary, peppermint green batch of mint flavored ice cream. It seemed delicious, but otherwise it was just an ordinary, not particularly noteworthy batch of ice cream. There wasn’t very much in the bag either.

“.....” Like a lost child on the verge of tears, Ritsuko gazed at the ice cream longingly.

Even now, she couldn’t forget the wondrous and deeply moving experience of eating it for the first time.

She was happy to be alive, and that wasn’t a joke or an exaggeration. Really. She truly thought that.

“Ritsuko, Ritsuko! Don’t you get it? That man was a monster! He wasn’t a normal human being! The stuff that he made can’t be good for you, I’m sure!” Her mother’s screams could be heard beyond the doorway.

“.....”

She’d taken it out, but Ritsuko didn’t have the courage to try the ice cream again, so it was still just sitting in her hands. But she couldn’t just abandon it either. In a way, having it on hand reminded her of the joyous feeling she’d had eating it, as it lifted her spirits. It was almost like a talisman, or a charm.

But even if she'd told her mother that, she probably wouldn't have listened. She would have thrown it out the moment she had a chance.

If her mother was going to take it away from her, and she couldn't come up with any other solution, then all she could do right here and now was to eat it.....!

“.....U...u”

If she put it in her mouth, it would surely melt away softly as an aromatic and slightly stimulating mint flavor would gradually fill her mouth. It would be a rich yet refreshing sweetness that would dance atop her tongue.

Of course.

Of course, it had to be delicious.

But—

“....Uuuu”

But, she too, like others before her, couldn't bring herself to put it to her lips. She was too scared —her courage nowhere to be found—

“Uuuu...”

As the ice cream in the quivering girl's hands steadily made contact with the heat in the air, it slowly melted, and that gentle mixture would soon be gone forever.

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.....”

With tears flowing from her eyes, Ritsuko was assaulted by a furious knocking sound—

* * * * *

...Well, take a look at that. Any bets on how this one's gonna turn out? 'Cause my bet's on 'not so good.'

It has the sort of idiocy that could make you laugh. Sure, it's not without the occasional heart-wrenching romance, and hell, its even got some pretty flashy fight's mixed in —gore included. But, honestly, does any of that really matter?

This story is about an artist.

It's also about a crook,

It ends up involving a kind of frozen dessert,

And it even includes some bizarre things.

However, there's one way to put it that's better than any other.
And that is, that this is the story of a fool.

...In short, it's not a story I'd call 'straightforward.'

Nothing goes well our main character. There isn't a single decision he makes that leads to any sort of progress. Not one of our actors knew what he was trying to do, and 'cause of that, he didn't take a moment to think about the consequences of his actions. With everything going on, the eerie bubble that clings onto things like a shadow missed everything. All those humans missed it too. Hell, they didn't even try.

But, well, even then, it's not worth worrying about, so it doesn't matter either way, right?

Come, come, the story's about to begin. Don't worry, you can just pay on the way out. Good kid or bad, everyone's welcome! You wouldn't wanna miss out on this once in a lifetime chance! This unsightly, awesome, seemingly pathetic and bizarre tale is weirdly ordinary and strangely complex. However! Don't let that color your expectations my friends!

And so, let our story begin...

Huh? 'What kind of story is it?'

Come on now...

How'd you get this far without knowin' anything? Naturally, this is the story of the rise and fall of our very own Peppermint Wizard—

Boogiepop Missing

The Peppermint Wizard



ACT.1
the tender.

tender [ten-dər]

Adjective

1) marked by, responding to, or expressing the softer emotions
2) showing care; highly susceptible to impressions or emotions
3) easily chewed; having a soft or yielding texture; easily broken, cut, or damaged 4) sensitive to touch or palpation; sensitive to injury or insult; demanding careful and sensitive handling 5) physically weak: not able to endure hardship; immature, young; incapable of resisting cold

...And other such meanings. There are, however, a few other parts of speech attached to the word, such as:

Verb

1) to present for acceptance

Noun

1) an offer or proposal made for acceptance 2) a nurse, watchman, or guardian 3) a ship employed to attend other ships (as to supply provisions) 4) a car attached to a steam locomotive for carrying a supply of fuel and water

...And so on. It's a word that has many diverse applications, and subtle, untranslatable nuances.

There was, in an age where you'd never see one, a western-style house that looked just like a castle.

"Wow, that's nice."

Standing in front of a building that seemed to be made from roughly stacked debris, Kyouichirou Teratsuki seemed genuinely impressed.

"S-sir, we heard you were coming over, so we tried to prepare as much as we could, but this is all very..." said the attorney that stood behind Teratsuki, reproachfully.

Besides the attorney, there wasn't a single figure in the area surrounding the sealed mansion.

"So, you heard I was coming and tried to clean things up in a hurry, Mhm? Good thing I came over on such short notice then." The person the attorney called "sir", Teratsuki, sneered.

His seemingly young outward appearance made it near impossible to tell that, officially, he was actually 52 years old. Those who didn't know any better might've assumed he was only around 30 — a mere half of that. Regardless, he had been, and still was the owner of a successful corporation that'd spread its influence into every market imaginable in a single lifetime. In a way, he was a one-man leader.

"Places like this are best seen when untouched by human hands."

Teratsuki twirled the cane in his hand through the air. It didn't really seem like he had a bad leg, so it was probably just for show.

"O...kay....."

The lawyer's face was sullen. He'd only been able verify this place on a paperwork level. He was sure it was the home of his former employer. However, that employer, who he could never identify a next of kin for, died leaving behind debt, and now one of the creditors of that debt, Teratsuki, was demanding to be shown inside. But it was way too soon. He didn't even have the decency to wait until after the funeral.

"Locked I see. Do you have a spare?"

"No, I don't. Mr. Kigawa didn't want anyone to trespass in here

because he... he was quite the oddball.”

“Well, we’ll go through the window then. The alarm’s off, right?”

“Ah- y- yes, I expect so.”

Suddenly, Teratsuki struck the window into a nearby room with his cane. The window made an especially loud sound as the shards of glass fell to the ground.

“Ah!” Surprised, the lawyer drew himself away from the sudden noise. Meanwhile, Teratsuki was stepping into the building through the hole he made.

He then looked around the room and snorted with a dissatisfied “hmph.”

“Surprisingly normal, can’t say the same for the outside though.”

“I-is that not to your liking?” the lawyer inquired as he followed behind Teratsuki, but Teratsuki steadily progressed into the room without answering. He then presumptuously went around surveying the deceased man’s house.

While following just behind, the lawyer thought “This guy’s scarier than I thought.....” as he stared at Teratsuki’s back. Was he really going to pick at Mr. Kigawa’s inheritance like a vulture until there was nothing left? It was like he didn’t have any mercy.

Then, upon coming up to a certain room, Teratsuki’s pace came to a sudden halt.

“Hey.”

Having been called out to, the Lawyer let out a surprised “Y-yes?”

“This place doesn’t have a blueprint either, right?”

“Y-yes, it doesn’t.”

“I see, looks like we’ll get along just fine,” he muttered with a smirk.

“Huh.....?”

Teratsuki advanced into the room. It looked like a storage room, as there were various boxes stacked all around. A few boxes had been brought in at some point, all labeled things like “vanilla extract,” “honey,” “chocolate,” and “jellybeans.” The labels were likely correct, given the the strange, sickly-sweet smell that enveloped the entire room.

“.....?” The lawyer knitted his eyebrows. Mr. Kigawa Norisuke was famously a drinker, and well known for not eating sweets.

So, why? Why did he have a mountain of them stacked in his house?

Teratsuki, who had been methodically tapping the floor with his stick as he walked, stopped.

“Here?”

There was nothing there; it was just an ordinary floor tile adjacent to where the carpet ended.

Right when the Lawyer started to wonder what he was talking about with a puzzled expression, Teratsuki Kyouichirou spoke out abruptly,

“Hey, you’ve done enough. Get out of here.” The way he said it was cold.

“Wha? No, you can’t just—”

“I’ll take it. The whole place. That should cancel out his debt with me. I’ll handle the other creditors as well. Meaning, you won’t be in charge of Kigawa Norisuke’s finances anymore.”

“Ah, no, that’s --”

“Got a problem with that? If so, you’ll have to find a new buyer. You think you can do that? If you think you can, you’re welcome to try...”

Teratsuki glared at the lawyer, who recoiled like a frog that’d just been caught by the gaze of a snake.

“Ah, no, I-I understand. I’ll get everything ready right away!”

“You should hurry back and take care of all that then.” Teratsuki lost interest in the lawyer after that and fixated his eyes on the floor once more. The lawyer quickly evacuated from the area, and was gone.

“Now then...”

Now alone, Teratsuki started to laboriously tap the floor with his cane once more. It was vague, but the way the sound echoed changed when he struck this tile compared to the others. Clearly, there was some sort of large cavity on the other side of this floor.

As the door in the ceiling opened with an audible “clank,” a young

man, who was sitting down on a sofa and hanging his head, let out a deep sigh.

“It’s no use, Norisuke. I still can’t tell how it’ll turn out at all.” His voice was in a tone that was higher pitched, like that of a boy, but his stature was that of a fine adult.

“Mr. Kigawa Norisuke won’t be coming anymore.” The voice was coming from above.

Surprised, the young man looked up. Teratsuki, who was standing on the spiral staircase leading into the room, looked intrigued.

“You have a pretty face. It reminds me a little of Michelangelo’s ‘David,’” he nodded with a grunt.

“.....” The young man continued to look at him blankly.

“This your first time?” Teratsuki asked.

“.....Huh?”

“I was asking if this was your first-time meeting someone other than Norisuke.”

“.....A, ah. Yeah, but—”

“My name is Teratsuki Kyouichirou. You can call me Kyouichirou. And your name is?”

“Tosuke. Kigawa Tosuke.” He introduced himself with a whisper.

“Guess you understand me. Seen anything good on TV?”

“I... stopped because it was boring.”

“Oh? Why was it boring?”

“Everyone just says and does the same thing. And everyone just looks the same. It’s stupid.”

“That harsh, isn’t it?” Teratsuki smiled cheerfully.

Then, he took another look around the basement.

The ceiling was lined with glass, so it let plenty of light pour in from outside. The space didn’t feel insular. There was also a fitted kitchen that was so extravagant it could have been in a first-class restaurant. Though, it was clear that none of it was professionally installed. The equipment was pretty all over the place, after all.

And then there were the refrigerators.

Five huge things, all lined up, and all making a low humming sound that echoed through the whole room.

“You don’t like other people?” Teratsuki asked.

“.....” The young man, Kigawa Tosuke, sank into silence once again.

“What did you think of Mr. Kigawa Norisuke? He did lock you up in here, right?”

“Don’t say ‘locked up.’ I’m the one who chose to be somewhere like this in the first place.”

“Is it scary outside?”

“.....” Tosuke glared at Teratsuki, and Teratsuki looked right back at him.

“That skin of yours...” when he heard that, Tosuke’s body stiffened. “Would that be the other reason why you don’t like TV?”

“.....”

“Peppermint green. The only people with that kind of skin color are painted that way to look like aliens. People like you fundamentally don’t belong in this world.”

“..... I know that I’m different than everyone else.”

“Hmm”

“And, I know that if I go outside people will look at me weirdly.”

“That’s okay.”

“But I don’t mind. Since Norisuke’s here. He gave me a reason to live.”

“And what’s that?”

“He eats my ice cream.” He extended his somewhat translucent, pale green hands. “Making all kinds of ice cream is really fun, and I like it when Norisuke gives me his opinion on it. Though, sometimes he says harsh things, like ‘This is the same thing you made last time.’ But, when he praises me, it feels really nice.”

“So, you’ve spent more than 10 years doing that?”

“I’ve been doing that for as long as I can remember, but I never think it’s tedious and I don’t really want to do anything else. Even though Norisuke brings me things like games and books, I start losing interest in them when I compare it to making ice cream. All that stuff just isn’t for me. But making ice cream is different. It’s something that I do with my own hands.

“I see.....” When Teratsuki lowered his head, Tosuke asked,

“What happened to Norisuke?”

“He died.” Teratsuki replied quickly and mercilessly.

“.....” Tosuke sank into silence again, his face covered in wave of anguish.

Teratsuki said to him, “You know what that means, right? To ‘die’?”

“I know.” Tosuke seemed annoyed as he shook his head.

“And I’m done for too, aren’t I?” He didn’t seem very sad. It might have just been the wrong time for it, or it could have been that it wasn’t possible for him to even feel that way.

“Done for, huh?”

“You just came here for the spectacle, didn’t you? Norisuke isn’t around anymore, so there’s no one here to protect my green body. I knew it was only a matter of time before this day would come,” he muttered feebly. Teratsuki looked at him calmly.

“How long have you known that you weren’t normal?”

“I’ve always known.”

“Did he tell you anything about where you were born?”

“No, I’m probably not Norisuke’s son, but he always acted like I was.”

“Well then, I wonder—” Teratsuki approached Tosuke and walked on by. He faced the refrigerators.

“.....?” As Teratsuki opened one of the refrigerators, Tosuke looked at him quizzically.

It had been completely converted into a freezer, and in it were bowls and bags packed full of various colors of ice cream. It was absolutely crammed full of them.

“Outside of here, Mr. Norisuke almost never seemed to eat sweets. Yet despite that, for some reason, he still ate your ice cream. I find that extremely intriguing.”

“Yeah—” Tosuke smiled suggestively.

“There was a pretty simple reason for that.”

“And that is...?”

“It’s because my ice cream was just that good. After eating my

stuff, none of the other sweets he ate came anywhere close.” He’d said it with complete confidence, and his eyes glittered with an innocent pride.

“Oh? Mind if I have a sample then?”

“Ah, give me a sec!”

After popping up out of the sofa he was sitting on, Tosuke produced a single pack from inside one of the refrigerators. Then, upon scooping it out with a tool taken from an assortment of them, he chose a dish from a remarkably complete set of tableware and arranged the ice cream onto it. As he gently placed a single leaf of mint onto it, he said,

“Here, enjoy!” Tosuke added a spoon and presented the ice cream to Teratsuki. He was truly skilled.

“Thank you. Now then, let’s see².” Teratsuki, just like Kigawa Norisuke before him, supposedly, sat down at the table, and sampled the frozen dessert.

His face turned to surprise.

“This...!” He started shoveling more into his mouth.

Tosuke grinned as he stared at Teratsuki.

“How is it? I’m pretty proud of that one if I do say so myself.”

“Yes, and for good reason. I’ve never run into anything like this before. It’s amazing.

“Hehe...” Tosuke scraped the tip of his nose confidently.

Then, as Teratsuki put down his spoon, a faint smile appeared on his face.

He slowly reexamined his surroundings.

You’d think that this place was a small empire; it’s like a miniature dreamland where ice cream reigns supreme. Kigawa Norisuke must have gone to some great lengths getting all this set up.

Teratsuki brought the spoon to his lips and savored the cold and sensually sweet taste spreading through his mouth.

“Was this Norisuke’s favorite?”

“Eh? Ah— no. That one seemed too strong for him.”

“—Then, why did you give it to me?”

“I thought it would fit you better.”

“I definitely like it, but how did you figure that out?”

“Hmmm” Tosuke’s face started to look troubled. Then, he said something that didn’t make sense.

“How? It’s the pain you carry.”

“...Pain? What do you mean?”

“Your pain. When I look at you, I can feel something in my chest, right here...”

Tosuke tapped a bit above and to the side of his solar plexus as he said this.

“It’s like, I feel that there’s this light, almost fuzzy pain there. That pain made me think that you’d like this ice cream. I would always change what ice cream I gave Norisuke depending on the kind of pain he had at the time.”

“.....” Shuddering, Teratsuki took in Tosuke’s words.

“...Can you actually feel a person’s preferences? As in, what’s best for their mind and body? Feel it physically, I mean.”

“.....I don’t know, that sounds too hard, but I’m pretty confident in figuring out what kinds of ice cream people like. It wasn’t just Norisuke— you liked it too, right?”

“That’s certainly the case.” Teratsuki let his gaze fall on the ice cream.

This wasn’t just some ordinary, delicious food anymore. Now, in Teratsuki’s eyes, this was a “weapon.”

The man shut his eyes and let out a small sigh.

“All they told me was that Kigawa Norisuke was in charge of keeping a failed experiment that needed to be taken care of, just another one of those things you have to do as a part of the Towa Organization. But I never expected this... Hell, with this I could probably take on the whole world,” he muttered softly.

“Hm? What was that?” Tosuke didn’t catch Teratsuki’s enigmatic words very well. Teratsuki opened his eyes and turned to Tosuke.

“I assume there’s plenty more ice cream where that came from?”

“Of course.”

“Good, good... Then how about this? Tosuke, don’t you feel like showing your talents to the world?”

“Huh?” Tosuke blinked his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“If your skin’s an issue, we could find a way to cover it up fairly easily. There are all sorts of ways to do that. But, more importantly, have you ever thought about taking over the world with ice cream?”

“.....Are you making fun of me?” Tosuke started to look a bit annoyed.

However, Teratsuki gently said,

“No, no. I am very, very serious,” as he spread his hands out just a bit. “I was thinking of adding you to a division of my company — the fast food division, to be exact — and I’d also make you that division’s king.”

“.....?” Unable to understand what he was saying, Tosuke just blinked his eyes.

.....And so began the fall of Kigawa Tosuke.

* * * * *

The name’s Captain Walker³. Call me Captain. I’m the storyteller for this tale.

Think it’s a weird name? Well, it’s whatever. It’s just got a nice ring to it. Doesn’t mean I’m actually a captain or anything though. Hehehehe.

Anyway—

As far as our wizard’s concerned, coming this Teratsuki Kyouchirou guy at the beginning of this tale was some crazy luck. I mean, that guy not only saved him from being beaten to a pulp, but he’d even given him a place to show his stuff. ‘Course, at the same time, meeting Teratsuki was also a bottomless pit of misfortune for our wizard here. Wanna know why? Well, it’s cause, essentially, Teratsuki didn’t have a future... When you think about it, it’s pretty fucked up. Especially since the man himself was well aware of it.

And you know what, I think that’s what makes him a cut above the rest, ‘cause guess what, wizard, the way I see it, deep down, Teratsuki was always going to betray the exact organization that a little shit like you were part of.

But seriously, Teratsuki, that was a guy who knew what he was doing. In fact report on Tosuke went something like this:

“He’s too valuable to be disposed of. The ability to produce a flavor that charms other people could be of great use to the Towa Organization's experiments.”

He also said,

“The flavors he produces have a particularity about them that can’t be found anywhere else, and, to that end, by stimulating the nerves responsible for taste, it may let once dormant traits awaken, bringing about the possibility of a new change in the minds of humans.”

And so on, and so on. Point is, he kept saying that all these flavors might have some kinda dangerous part to them that could change the structure of a person. Was it true? No one could say at that point, but he said he was going to do some experiments on it to find out. Hell, it could have been just some bullshit excuse, but we really didn’t have the data to prove otherwise.

It was believable enough though, so the system bought it. I mean, after all, they can do whatever the hell they want. But they weren’t idiots, so they secretly planted an agent to monitor everything...

Well anyway, through this and that, Tosuke Kigawa managed to narrowly escape death; though, of course, he didn’t understand any of that. And his role to plant a “bomb” inside each and every person? He doesn’t understand a lick of that either. Ignorance sure is bliss, huh?

In the end, thanks to Teratsuki’s scheming, Tosuke was never told a damn thing, including who he really was. Did Teratsuki think this was for the best? Or was his soul that malicious? Well, no way of knowing that now. Either way, Kigawa Tosuke, a boy who’d spent all his time at that estate, was strung along by Teratsuki, and he stepped out into the outside world understanding nothing.

* * * * *

“First of all, mind putting this on your face?”

As Teratsuki handed over a set of foundation and make-up, Tosuke

blinked.

“.....You got this all for me?”

“No, no I already had it lying around. Truth be told, I’m also fairly fond of disguises.” Teratsuki grinned.

“Oh yeah?”

Tosuke, who had failed to grasp what he was talking about, covered his green skin with makeup just as he was told. Through his dexterity, he managed to apply it cleanly without messing up.

The two of them stepped out of the estate and into Teratsuki’s BMW. There wasn’t a driver. Despite being incredibly wealthy, he preferred to drive himself.

“By the way, about that ice cream,” Teratsuki started talking to Tosuke, “you’re really good at picking out a flavor for each person; but, will you be okay picking out a flavor that fits a crowd of people?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you can’t do that, then it wouldn’t be fast food. It needs to be the same every time. You can have some variety but having a ton of subtle and varied flavors just isn’t realistic.”

“Huh,” Tosuke nodded, “Is that how it works?”

“Can you do it?” As Teratsuki asked this, Tosuke raised the edge of his lips, and snorted his nose, like Teratsuki was calling him an idiot.

“That’s a stupid question.”

“Meaning...?”

“How would I handle everyone? I wouldn’t need to. It’ll be easy to find a flavor that fits everyone.”

“Really? And how will you do that?”

Tosuke whisked his finger into the air and declared,

“All I need to do is cut a few corners,” with a smug look on his face.

.....And so commenced the glory of Kigawa Tosuke.

2

“Huh..... Well, I don’t think it’s bad per se...” After trying some of the ice cream in front of him, Suzukuni Confectionery’s senior managing director, Kinoshita Shigeru, looked troubled.

“So? I’d say it’s about ready to move on to production, wouldn’t you?” said Kageyama, a man who’d been dispatched from MCE.

In a meeting room where the Suzukuni Confectionery board of directors congregated, at each seat was a serving of ice cream brought over from MCE. Everyone sampled it in silence.

“Hmm, well, what did everyone else think?” After finishing off the ice cream, Kinoshita’s reply was indecisive. Furthermore, it deceptively shifted the conversation over onto everyone else. “How about you, Director Sakaguchi?”

“Hmm..... Well, I don’t have a problem with the product itself...” Sakaguchi didn’t commit to an answer either. “However, according to this data, this would cost quite a bit to manufacture. I think the question we should be asking is how we would even produce it.”

For whatever reason, Sakaguchi’s remark made the entire room feel at ease. Everyone in the room finally started to speak up, despite being so tight-lipped earlier.

“Yes, that is the question isn’t it.”

“Adjustments like this would clearly exceed the average output of our company’s production line.”

“Of course, if you’re worried about the up-front cost, Teratsuki told me that he was ‘prepared to take the full brunt of any extraneous costs,’” Kageyama replied.

“Mr. Teratsuki said that? Well, if that’s the case, I’m sure it’ll be fine; however, our company doesn’t exactly have a precedent for participating in any sort of partnership with him.” Kinoshita looked down at his bowl of ice cream. Though, it was already empty.

“Ah, I still have some, would you mind trying another one of our samples?” Kageyama was quick on his feet. He produced a dish from his cooler, brought it over to Kinoshita, and placed another serving of ice cream on top of it.

“.....What the hell!?” While watching a video documenting the events that occurred in the conference room. Tosuke snorted with displeasure.

“Come on! Why aren’t they talking about how good it is!?”

The video had been taken from a camera stealthily fitted into a nearby bag, so the directors of Suzukuni Confectionery obviously had no idea that their meeting had been recorded. “Go record it for him,” Teratsuki had said, “it’ll be interesting.” So, at his behest, Kageyama reluctantly caught it all in secret.

“That’s just how it goes. It was business after all, not some game.”
“Still— “

Tosuke wore a turtleneck sweater and a pair of silken gloves, obviously trying to hide the color of his skin. His face alone was covered in a natural-looking makeup. This was how he presented himself; he never showed his real skin to anyone, even the other employees.

Kageyama, an employee of MCE’s new development division, sighed. His reassignment had pretty much come out of nowhere. One day he was told that he’d be helping to make whatever ice cream Tosuke came up with, and the next he was already dealing with all the grief that Tosuke’s worldly ignorance was ‘causing him.

“Oh! Are you actually bringing it out?”

Tosuke’s eyes sparkled. The screen now showed Kageyama passing a second dish over to Kinoshita.

“Yeah...” Kageyama scowled a bit. He knew what would happen next, and he didn’t want Tosuke to see it since he’d been getting more and more cocky lately. However, he was told to show it to him on Teratsuki’s orders, so Kageyama couldn’t stop the tape here.

Behind the screen, as soon as he put the new ice cream in his mouth, Kinoshita froze in place. His eyes widened in astonishment.

“...Th-- this is...” He was shocked, petrified into being unable to say anything.

When he saw that, Tosuke cackled with laughter.

“Haha! The old man was stunned, literally!”

What was that anyway? You told me to only give him another serving.”

“Ah, I saw a picture of that old guy beforehand, so I could tell what his preferences were. Didn’t see anyone else’s picture though. He’s got a pain that’s sorta ‘cracky,’ you know? Adding a bit of acidity

tends to work well on that sort of feeling.”

“Huh.....” Tosuke gave an explanation that didn’t explain anything, but despite his bewilderment, Kageyama wasn’t interested in pursuing the subject either. He decided to remain silent as a result.

After all, Tosuke was the one who’d chosen Shizukuni Confectionery as the manufacturers of his ice cream to begin with. He’d systematically ordered every single ice cream on the market and sampled each one. In the end, he chose Suzukuni Confectionery had come out on top .

“Their fundamentals are strong. The flavor’s sorta plain, but they definitely have skill,” he’d said, or, well, something to that effect anyway. Actually figuring out the logistics of the partnership was Kageyama and his department’s job. Tosuke tended to just give orders as he pleased.

Yeah.....If this guy goes into a meeting or something, he’s just going to ruin it. Kageyama looked at Tosuke, who was clapping in delight, and sighed. He was like a child.

“Look at his face! It’s all like, ‘give me more’! Hahaha!” He pointed at the screen and laughed hysterically.

Kageyama cleared his throat.

“.....Anyway, it looks like they’re going to have a formal discussion on it. I expect, it’ll take them about a week to give us a reply.” When Kageyama said that, Tosuke suddenly swiveled his head towards him in surprise.

“.....A week?”

“Yes, should take about that long, or so I’m told.”

“.....Why?” he asked, seriously.

“Why, he says—”

“Did they not like it after all?” his voice quivered; he looked like he was about to cry. “Is my ice cream not enough to get them to work with us?”

He held his knees in his hands and cradled them. His hands trembled; he wasn’t messing around. In fact, he was truly frightened.

.....What’s with this guy?

He'd been so confident up until now, and yet, for some reason, he'd done a 180. Now there he was, trembling.

".....No, that's not it, setting some time aside like this is pretty common; it doesn't mean that they'll decline the offer." Tosuke brought his head up to look back at him with a distrustful sort of look in his eyes.

".....Really? You really think they'll accept?"

"My personal feeling about it? I think they might go ahead with it."

".....I see. Then that's great, but..." He still wore a worried expression. Kageyama, who was starting to get depressed, tried to change the subject.

"Oh, by the way, we still need to find and hire some staff, don't we? I don't think it's a very good idea for you to try and run everything on your own. Any idea of what you'll do about that?"

"Staff?Ah, right, to make the ice cream." Tosuke shook his head two or three times. "I'm not sure... Is there really someone out there that's as good as me at making ice cream?" He said with a serious look on his face.

It was an extremely bold statement, but it didn't sound arrogant or conceited. He made it sound like he was just stating the obvious, but that was also exactly what made sound so outrageously offensive.

"We don't really need someone who's at your level. All I mean is that we just need someone on staff that'll help out, like an assistant, get what I mean?" Kageyama said, finally fed up with Tosuke.

"Hmm....." Whether he was listening or not, Tosuke crossed his arms and started to brood over it all. "I wouldn't really say I have something in mind, but..."

"What is it?"

"A person, someone who I wanted to get to try my ice cream. Seems like she also makes ice cream and other sweets."

"And who would this be?"

"She come up an article I read. I was looking at a photo of her, and the pain I felt from her was interesting. Pretty sure her name was something like... Kusunoki Rei."

.....And so, I'm sure you've realized by now that this is where Kusunoki Rei enters our tale.

At the time, the girl was only around twenty-one, and even at such a young age, she was already a lecturer at some culinary school. It wasn't exactly a part time job at a convenience store. The school had hired her as a figurehead make them look good. 'Cause of that, they might say she's a lecturer, but in reality, all that her teaching had entailed this year was just a few lessons here and there. Most of the time, she was visiting different countries to sample sweets under the pretense of training and winning all sorts of contests in her school's name, amongst other things. From around her teens onward, she'd been decimating every single confectionary contest and ice cream competition that she came across, and rumors of her talent spread as a result. The president of the school even liked to have her entertain guests by making cakes and other deserts when he attended company dinners. Needless to say, she was quite popular.

Given all this, it makes a lot of sense that the school wasn't too happy when Kageyama's people tried to contact Kusunoki Rei.

"That girl is the pride and joy of this school, she can't just leave."

"We must ask you to stop trying to steal her from us."

.....and so on and so on. It was all so threatening. Kageyama's people figured that there was no way they'd get her, so, they tried to appeal to Tosuke.

"Sir, this is pointless. Let's just find someone else." At that, Tosuke let out something resembling a groan and thought for a bit before he finally asked something in response.

"We know Kusunoki Rei's address, don't we?"

"Well, more or less. We had MCE do a background check on her a while ago. But, sir, you aren't thinking of going there, are you? If you do that she might not even want to—"

"Well then," Tosuke continued, as if he didn't hear what the other person was saying, "how about we see about sending some ice cream over to her some time?" As he said this, he smirked in a way that

made it all seem very amusing.

“Haa.....”

Anyway, just as Tosuke had ordered, Kageyama’s people sent some ice cream that Tosuke had made to where she was staying using a home delivery service complete with a freezer. And, well, as for what became of all this....

* * * * *

“This the place?” Kusunoki Rei looked at Kageyama, who was standing beside her.

“Y, yes, well...” Kageyama looked embarrassed.

The two stood in front of a crumbling, dilapidated building with windows that were blown out in every direction. It was hard to imagine anyone living in that place; in fact, it looked like nothing more than a prime example of an abandoned building.

“So you’re saying that guy who made that ice cream is around here somewhere?”

Rei wore a violet dress and a large, navy blue hat. With the way she was standing, her figure kinda looked like a mushroom. She was certainly beautiful, but the way she pouted made her look like a spoiled kid.

“Oh, well, he’s an eccentric guy. He said that he didn’t want very many people around,” Kageyama responded as he wiped the sweat of his forehead with a handkerchief.

“Mhm.” Rei nodded and, without any sort of trepidation, stepped into the building.

Kageyama quickly followed suit.

One hour ago, Rei had suddenly showed up and inquired about the office in order to make some a bold declaration.

“Bring out the guy that made that ice cream.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

After he told her that he wasn’t there at that moment, she then demanded for him to “Take me to where he is then.” So, in his bewilderment, he called where Tosuke was staying, but it wouldn’t

connect. It was clear that he wouldn't get anywhere doing that, so he ended up taking her to him directly.

"Does this elevator even work?"

"Y, yes..."

"I hate climbing stairs. It takes too much stamina." Everything she said sounded like a declaration.

"Don't worry. This building gets plenty of gas and electricity..... it just doesn't have any other residents. That's no surprise though, considering that this property was originally going to be torn down."

Kageyama called the elevator.

However, even after waiting for a good long while, the elevator never came. He wasn't sure what was going on, but Kageyama didn't like the feeling of it one bit.

"It's not coming, is it?"

".....No, I suppose not."

The elevator's display showed that it was stopped at the 7th floor, and that was none other than the exact floor Tosuke was occupying.

"Well whatever. Stairs it is then" And with that, she immediately headed towards the stairs.

"Eh? Didn't you just say....."

"I might hate walking, but I hate waiting even more. I'd rather do some more walking." Her voice didn't have an ounce of irritation in it as she said this. Once again, she sounded incredibly assertive.

"O-oh." Kageyama followed after her.

Then, ten seconds after the two of them were gone, the number on the display of the elevator started to fall as if it was timed perfectly to their departure.

For someone who claimed to hate walking, Rei was oddly quick on her feet, and Kageyama was having trouble keeping up with her. Despite climbing up to the 7th floor at what seemed to be a half-gallop, Rei was calm, and wasn't even short of breath.

"This it?" Standing in front of a closed, black door, she looked back at Kageyama.

"Y-yes, that's it. I'll call him now....." And, at that moment, just

Kageyama reached out to press the intercom...

Ding. The two of them heard a faint sound coming from behind them.

Needless to say, the sound was from the elevator. It had been climbing from the bottom floor, and that sound meant that it'd finally reached its destination.

“.....”

The two looked at each other.

As they did so, the elevator door opened slowly, like it was apologizing for what would come next; and then, suddenly, the person inside the elevator jumped out.

“Hey! Welcome! I knew you'd come and visit!”

As they took a look at the figure, Kageyama was flabbergasted. Most of the reason for that being that a clown was standing in front of him.

Yes, a clown.

No, seriously, a clown.

That's the only way you could really describe it.

Around his eye was a large, heart-shaped mark, and his entire face was evenly colored a faded emerald green. The color of his skin was too glossy and translucent to be makeup, but that wasn't something people would notice.

“K-Kigawa-san?”

“Surprised? Hahaha!” Kigawa threw out his chest and laughed.

In his astonishment, Kageyama couldn't say a word. However, the person Tosuke was greeting, Kusunoki Rei, was as composed as ever.

“So, you're Kigawa Tosuke then?” she said dispassionately. She didn't seem to have a single shred of interest or confusion about the appearance before her. “You stopped the elevator, didn't you?”



“It was good exercise, right? Should really work your lower body more if you’re going to keep making all those delicious sweets.”

“How did you make that ice cream?” Rei asked him abruptly, ignoring Tosuke’s remarks.

“Ahhh, that!” Tosuke crossed his arms and hummed. “I suppose it was my superb ice cream that lead you all the way here, hm?”

“It wasn’t ‘superb.’ More like third-rate,” Rei said flatly. The commend made Tosuke falter dramatically, complete with sound effects, but Rei didn’t play any attention to his reaction. “That ice cream was weird though, what the hell did you use?”

“Ahh, well, it was just a bit of magic,” Tosuke fluttered his hands, “After all, I am a wizard.”

“No, you’re a fraud.” Rei scowled at him. “There wasn’t any sugar in it. You can’t call that ice cream.”

Kageyama looked at Tosuke in confusion. He’d sampled the ice cream before they sent it out to test it, and he’d actually thought that it was almost sickeningly sweet. How wasn’t there any sugar in it?

“Pretty useful for anyone who’s on a diet, huh?” Tosuke said grinning, which just made Rei shake her head.

“Really? Because I’m pretty certain that ice cream had far more calories than any normally prepared ice cream. It’s pretty bad for digestion too. Hell, I’d say it was just really unhealthy overall. That’s why you’re an imposter. You think it’s fun to trick people like that. You used rice as a base, right? You fermented it, pickled it, then used salt as an accent so that it would make it seem sweet. However, what I want to know is what the hell you did to the rice before that.” As she rattled all that off effortlessly, Tosuke just smiled more and more.

“...Just like I thought, you didn’t miss a beat. You saw right through me.”

“Anyway, my little magic trick aside. I hoped that I could get you to try some of my more serious batches.” Tosuke tendered all sorts of ice cream to Rei, who was now in his room. He was still wearing the clown outfit, of course.

Rei said nothing as she tried a single bite of each kind.

Kageyama watched over the entire scene nervously; however, Rei didn’t have any sort of reaction, as she mechanically put various kinds of ice cream into her mouth one by one. The scene made Kageyama worry that she didn’t really understand any of the flavors in front of her.

Before long, she finished sampling every single one, and the

proceeded to throw a sharp glare over towards Tosuke.

“.....Are you sane?”

“I’m not sure. Kageyama, am I sane?”

“Ah, well...” Kageyama groaned in confusion. It wasn’t exactly a subject he had any confidence in. However, ignoring the two-man comedy duo, Rei continued on.

“Who the hell’s going to eat ice cream that’s 10,000-yen per serving?” From sampling the ice cream, it seemed like she’d determined what kind of ingredients were used and the approximate cost of it all for each one.

“You will. I made it with that in mind, at least.”

“You’re going to need to make some considerable overhaul to how you do this if you want to sell it.”

“Yeah, seems that way. I don’t really get how that kind of stuff works.”

“A novice then.” Rei snorted derisively. “Seems like up until now you’ve been limited to making ice cream for those around you.”

“Even so, I’m sure that my product will have plenty of verietiy. What you’re eating right now is just a fraction of what I can do.”

“This is why you’re so naïve. Look, if all you do is make this sort of stuff, then yes, you’ll start getting customers, and the stuff will sell. But don’t come to me boasting about having tons of variety. Most of your customers aren’t going to notice small nuances like that, and it’s naïve to think that you can get them to understand.”

“Aha, so that’s how dealing with a lot of people is supposed to work, is it? But I’m sure it won’t matter who it is. One bite and they’ll all be infatuated with my ice cream.”

“How many customers do you think are going to be willing to come and eat the same thing over and over again? All you’re going to get are the kinds of people that just jump at their favorite flavor, and the price of your ice cream is just going to whittle that number down.”

“Haha, I see” Unaffected, Tosuke nodded.

Meanwhile, Kageyama was still astonished by the current situation.

T-they’re... actually on the same wavelength?

Up until now, there wasn't a single person that could have a conversation like this with Tosuke. Despite the both of them having this strange sense of self confidence, their conversation flowed without ever devolving into a fight.

You might say it was... a kind of comradeship, perhaps.

It seemed like the two of them would talk forever if he left them alone, so Kageyama nervously inserted himself into the conversation.

"So, uh, Kusunoki-sensei, this means that you'll work with us instead, right?"

"I'll answer that if you answer one of my questions." Rei said without taking her gaze off of Tosuke.

"A question for me?"

"Who else would I ask?" It was like Rei didn't even notice that anyone else, including Kageyama, was there. Once again, Kageyama looked uncomfortable.

Delighted, Tosuke replied, "Hm, so what's your question?"

"How do you decide what's 'delicious'?" Rei's question was kinda difficult to understand.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I meant what I said." Her question was nigh unapproachable, but Tosuke wasn't perplexed in the slightest. "Hm, well, I could explain, it's just that no one besides Kyouichirou has ever really understood it."

"Just tell me."

"Pain. It's the pain in people. Targeting that is the best way to force a person to think that something is delicious. Your pain is vast for some reason; though, it's hard for me to make out."

"Pain? What makes you think that?"

"Deep in my chest, it, how would I put it..... throbs in pain. That's how I know."

"....." Rei stared at Tosuke quizzically. Kageyama, meanwhile, had no clue what was going on.

".....My pain's vast?" Rei asked, eventually, in a subdued voice. Tosuke nodded.

"It's either really large, or, if not that, then it's something dull."

Taken at face value, his words may have seemed staggeringly rude, but it was clear that Tosuke wasn't mocking her.

"....." At last, Rei took her gaze off of Tosuke. ".....Pretty sure it's both, actually." She muttered.

Tosuke's eyes widened with a small "Eh?"

"That's the first time someone's ever understood what I meant like that."

"I'm weird, aren't I?" She said, and the ends of her lips seemed to curve upward into a faint smile. "I bet I've even got you beat."

"Hm?..... Well, whatever. So tell me, what's your deliciousness criteria, hm?" Tosuke asked his question, and the girl ignored him. Instead, she turned towards Kageyama.

"What were MCE's terms for hiring me again?"

"Huh? — A, ahh, well, we'll offer you as much as you want, or, well, as much as we can..."

"So you wouldn't mind if I do something like, say, come up with what the shop will look like?"

"Ah, well..... If you have an idea you'd like to share, then go ahead..."

"Then, is it alright if I give you an idea I have for the logo?"

"A, ahh..... what do you have in mind?" Kageyama asked; though, he already had a bad feeling about what she'd say next. As he spoke, the thought of her suggesting her own face crossed his mind. She wouldn't do something that ridiculous, right?

However, what Rei said next wasn't anything like that. Instead, it was something much more unimaginable.

"A crucifix.⁴"

".....I'm sorry?"

"A crucifix, you know, that cross or post or whatever that people are nailed to. That one."

Kusunoki Rei; twenty-one years old. This beautiful young woman — a talented cook and craftsman of sweets — had, at that very moment, her heart set on an image synonymous with death.

“..... A crucifix? That’s awfully avant-garde,” said Semigasawa Suguru, who seemed to be amused by the whole ordeal.

“Haaa.....” Kageyama gave a vague nod as he wiped sweat from his forehead.

The break room at MCE’s main office, and the area around it, was a place a great deal of people from each and every one of MCE’s many sections used as a sort of common room for quick meetings and talks.

“That girl – what was her name again? Rei-chan? She sounds awfully determined, though, maybe determined isn’t the word for it. It’s more like she’s soaring above us, head in the clouds. Huhuhue.”

Semigasawa is a designer who, at the moment, is consulting on how to move forward with the ice cream division’s new image. Naturally, he’s a fairly mature man; though, he tends to speak like a woman. Of course, despite being considered effeminate, his more masculine traits prevented him from putting on makeup like Tosuke. There weren’t any stories floating around about him hitting on guys, and yet he was still single. Maybe he’s just a narcissist.

“Well, do you think they’ll be able to pull it off?” Kageyama found it easy to talk to him. He may have been strange, but, compared to people like Tosuke and Rei, at least he had some common sense.

“Well, common sense tells me that it’s a little too reckless.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Kageyama sighed. “But she’s demanding that we go along with her condition. She won’t work with us otherwise.”

“I assume you can’t just drop her and move on, right?”

“Yeah, Director Tosuke ended up taking quite a like to her. He keeps saying she’s irreplaceable, an indispensable resource, and so on... but even he can’t handle her. Man, where the hell did he even find her anyway...?”

“Must be tough. Ever regret being hired onto this job?”

“It’s a little late for me to say that.”

“Ahaha. Well, life is like a straight path you can’t turn back on, isn’t it? But... Ice cream and a crucifix huh? I wouldn’t say it works as well as Oreos and nacho cheese,⁵” Semigasawa chuckled, “...But you

never know; could be interesting. Something that eccentric might even draw up some good publicity.”

“Think it’ll be that easy? I mean, it won’t go over very well if we only draw in a few people, right?”

“At any rate, you have to do something to start bringing people in to buy something. How about you start coming up to customers that are keeping their distance from the shop from behind and scare the daylights out of them?”

“The hell? We’re not a haunted house.” Kageyama wrinkled his face at Semigasawa’s lame joke while Semigasawa laughed.

“Yeah, a haunted house, exactly!” He said.

* * * * *

.....And with that, the amusement enterprise of one Kigawa Tosuke started to take shape.

The shop itself was a fairly common stand-up sort of place, but what made it stand out was its monster-themed decor. Naturally, the logo was a crucifix slanted diagonally with a clown hung from it.⁶ Little ghosts floated around it as creatures like a wolfman and an ugly, Dracula-esque figure were drawn here and there. Well, of course, the entire thing was drawn and constructed with a cute and fancy flair, but if you asked what it all meant, well, the answer’s obvious: “Ice cream is chilly, and horror sends a chill down your spine!” It was a dumb, cliché joke.

Of course, from what I heard, Teratsuki Kyouichirou – the guy who payed for it all the moment he heard about it – just smiled and said “good work” like he always did. Gotta hand it to him though -- that bastard does do some “good work” every so often.

The shop was just getting its foot out the door, so they had to start by doing business out of failing supermarkets and department stores, and, well, it was no surprise when passersby just laughed at it. “What’s that supposed to be? It’s so dumb.” Barely anyone came to the shop at all. Kusunoki Rei had adjusted the price of the ice cream extensively; though, it was still more expensive than most other shops, and that didn’t exactly make people want to come in and try the

stuff...

And so..... there was nothing they could do but wait for some screwball to turn up and give it a taste on some sort of whim. Then, just as the shop struggled to find its footing...

* * * * *

“Ah! Over here, Miyashita.”

A seventeen-year-old Takeda Keiji stopped in front of the ice cream stand.

“What’s with all the decorations?”

At his side was a sixteen-year-old Miyashita Touka, who was poking at the cutesy little ghosts on the storefront. As she did, they bounced back and forth on the piano wire they hung from.

“It’s so weird.”

Meanwhile, the part-timer working at the shop, a high school girl⁷, looked at the two with a touch of disdain.

“.....”

The girl wondered what she was even doing there. Barely anyone even comes by to begin with. I mean, look at this couple. They seem like they have a pretty good thing going on. Why didn’t she have a boyfriend?

Though, at second glance, she could tell that the two of them weren’t exactly clinging to each other.

“So, this place was designed by a guy I know named Semigasawa. He works for MCE. You know, that big company that’s on TV sometimes?”

“Never heard of it.”

“O-oh, really? Well, I’ve been trying to keep an eye on his work. No harm in doing that. Well, that’s what my sempai keeps telling me anyway.”

“It’s nice to hear that your job’s going so well sempai, but you’re in your third year already. What about exams? Are you really not going to college?”

“..... No, I... Well, I’ve been thinking about a lot of things lately.”

“Hmph.”

The girl behind the counter got the feeling that their conversations tended to turn to squabbles. *Serves you right. Life's not so easy, is it?* she thought, and that thought made her feel just a bit better.

"Anyway, why don't we get something?"

"I don't know. It's pretty expensive."

"Don't worry, it's my treat. I just got paid recently anyway."

".....Well good for you then."

".....Miyashita, are you mad at me?"

"Not really."

Since the two of them were finally interested in actually buying something, the girl behind the counter put on a nice, refreshing smile, then, in one breath, she greeted the couple like she'd just read a line out of a manual.

"Hello and welcome! Is there anything that I could get for you today?"

"See anything you like?"

"I don't even know what most of this stuff is. Well..... I guess I'll have the mint chocolate chip then."

The girl behind the counter found herself impressed with the other girl's choice. Unprompted, she had chosen the mint-chip ice cream, which was well regarded by the few customers they did get. In fact, it was one of shop's featured items; though, they had yet to sell any of their most recent batch.

"Alright, I'll take some frozen yogurt then."

"What size would you like? Medium?"

"Sure"

"Will that be in a cone, or a cup?"

"Cone."

"Alright, here you go. Thank you and enjoy!" The girl handed each of their respective orders to the couple.

Go ahead, be amazed... she thought as the two took their orders.

They both innocently tasted their ice cream, and suddenly found themselves at a loss for words.

"W-what is this?" The boyfriend was absolutely

dumbfounded. This stuff's incredible!"

"... Yeah, it really is. What's in this?" The girl was just as surprised.

In her mind, the girl tending the shop stuck out her chest and chuckled. Of course their ice cream was delicious. The shop's customer base may be small for now, but they'll definitely be the talk of the town one day.

After a third order, the couple found themselves happily laughing and eating together, and the girl behind the counter didn't seem to mind one bit. On the contrary, she was actually pleased to see the two of them getting along so well, despite things looking kind of strained earlier."

*After all, our ice cream can bring people true happiness*⁸, she thought, as she allowed herself to feel a bit of pride in what she did. If only the shop didn't have any weird monster decorations on it. She'd have no complaints if not for those.

The two teens headed back home smiling, and the shop was devoid of customers once more.

"Haa..." The girl breathed a small sigh and hung her head.

When she looked up, she saw the girl had stopped mid-stride and was looking back towards the shop.

It startled her.

It shouldn't have, there was nothing to really be surprised by in particular, but the look the girl had in her eyes was strange... It felt sharp, like she was looking right through her.

"— delicious indeed, but... mayhap it reaches a bit too far into the depths of the heart....." She muttered. The voice clearly came from the girl, and yet it sounded like it was coming from a completely different person. Actually, it didn't even sound like it was coming from a girl at all. If she didn't say that, then what did? It was something this girl would never understand. It was an unidentified voice. Yes, like that of a real monster.

W-wha, what the hell.....?

The girl glared back at the shop. It was like she was locked in a mortal struggle, ready to kill at a moment's notice.

What the hell....?!

If she kept doing that for much longer, the girl would probably end up screaming as loud as she could. Though, the whole situation only lasted a few moments at best.

“Hm, Something wrong?” The boyfriend looked over to his girlfriend, and she responded,

“Nah, not really” In her original voice. Then, she turned back towards where she was going, and the two walked away.

Rumors of the shop began spreading thanks to some other people trying the ice cream on a whim, much like that couple did before. As others steadily came to the shop to “give it a shot,” and in no small part thanks to the overwhelming quality of its product compared to the competition, Kigawa Tosuke’s ice cream found itself acquiring one endorsement after another.

“Man, word of mouth is really making it take off.”

Teratsuki Kyouichirou nodded with content at Kageyama’s report. “I’m not surprised; it’s flavor’s really something. Either way, seems everything’s keeping on track.”

“Semigasawa’s designs have helped as well. Now that the public is used to them, they seem to have taken on a popularity of their own. Honestly, I was really worried before, but now...”

“Is it the blessings of that talented young woman perhaps? How is Tosuke getting along with her? Their rivalry isn’t making them butt heads or anything, is it?”

“No, not really. They get along so well, you’d think they were twins. Though, it might be because they only really care about making sweets. They’re a lot alike, those two.”

“I see.....” Teratsuki smiled wryly. “Well, it’s sweet that they’re getting along well. It’s not as if it’s going to last. After all, its...” Teratsuki started to say something, but he cut himself off partway through.

“Huh?”

“.....It’s nothing. This all makes me want to meet up with them.”

“S-sure. Should I find somewhere to meet up?”

“No, I’ll just head over there.”

“Huh? Ah, b-but sir—”

“After all, I sincerely doubt I’m going to hinder them just by being there, right?” Teratsuki laughed, and Kageyama couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

* * * * *

..... From what the great Captain Walker could tell, that bastard knew exactly what fate would be waiting for him when he arrived.⁹

* * * * *

“So, what, am I supposed to only use colorful toppings? That’s stupid!” Tosuke raised his voice to a near shout.

Conversely, Semigasawa remained calm, and said, “I understand what you’re saying, but how our customers view the shop is quite important, and how the product looks is a key part of that.”

In the company’s development kitchen, Semigasawa, the shop’s coordinator, and Tosuke were arguing over a difference in opinion. To their side was Kusunoki Rei, who “couldn’t care less about picking a side.” As a result, she remained a bystander in this situation.

“But the colors should fit with the picture you get when you taste it!”

“Our customers are looking for a surprise too. Staging that surprise is important.”

Neither of them were giving up any ground.

Meanwhile, Rei was mixing together ingredients in a bowl to make some test batches of ice cream. As she worked next to the ongoing argument, she’d mumble comments to herself like, “It’s a bit strong.....” as she tasted each one.

And in this turmoil, Kageyama entered accompanied by Teratsuki Kyouichirou.

“H-hey, you guys.” Kageyama timidly raised his voice, but not a single person in the room heard him. “Hey, uhhh—”

Despite his desperation, Kageyama had no leverage over the room.

At around the time Kageyama had started trembling, Teratsuki announced, “My, this is quite the party,” with a laugh. As he did, everyone else turned their heads towards him in surprise.

“—Ah! Kyouichirou?” Tosuke said, letting his tone fall to a more normal level.

“President! You didn’t you tell me you were coming!” Naturally, Semigasawa was unable to hide his surprise.

“Don’t worry, I heard everything was going well, so I stopped by to see it for myself.” Teratsuki replied, looking around the room. His face was relatively expressionless, but there was a sternness to his gaze that would make anyone uncomfortable. Anyone except Tosuke, that is. “Hey there, Kusunoki. This is the first time we’ve met, isn’t it?”

After Teratsuki introduced himself, Rei gave a vague nod and a “...hello.” Despite her tendency to do as she pleases, even she knew how to act around Teratsuki Kyouichirou. Though, what she said next was much more in character.

“You’re actually pretty handsome, huh? Guess all the pictures I see of you aren’t fake after all.”

Semigasawa sputtered as his mind failed to stop him in time, Kageyama’s face went pale, but Teratsuki didn’t seem to mind and just laughed it off.

“Are you complementing me?” he replied.

“I don’t know, am I? Sometimes I wonder if saying that a guy looks good actually constitutes a compliment.” Rei took a brief glance at Tosuke, which seemed to imply that he was an example to her claim. Semigasawa tried and failed to hold back another laugh. Meanwhile, Tosuke didn’t seem to understand as he quizzically tilted his head to the side.

“Hahahaha! I suppose so!” Rei’s comments seemed to delight him as Teratsuki laughed haughtily.

Afterwards, the five of them sat down to have dinner over at the hotel Teratsuki was staying at. In a reserved section, of course.

“Alright, since we have some food experts here today, let’s try to make the chef quake in his boots a bit, shall we? I’m always telling

them how good the food is, but I figured I'd give them a hard time for once." The waiter bowed in response to Teratsuki's statement and asked for him to "go easy" on them as a sort of faux courteous gesture devoid of interest.

Meanwhile, Tosuke was anxiously looking around the immediate vicinity of their table.

"What's wrong?" Rei asked.

Tosuke scowled, "What is this place?"

"What are you talking about?... It's a restaurant."

"Is this really a place to have dinner?" Tosuke extended his hands out to his sides.

There restaurant's decor was extravagant. The tables had an antique style and were made out of oak, and they all sat atop a shaggy carpeting. There was even a chandelier hanging above each table.

"What do you mean?"

"It's intimidating. I can feel the place weighing down on me. I doubt that it's good for anyone's digestion.

".....You're such a kid."

"What? I'm serious."

Teratsuki took that as his queue to cut into the conversation.

"I'm sure you are, but like she said, places like this tend to be good places to eat."

"Why?"

"Well, the kind of people that visit these places tend to be highly strung people anyway. This is pretty normal for people like that."

"Oh yeah? Then are you one of those people? You're always living with all those burdens and stuff."

Tosuke's words didn't seem like they were directed at the head of a conglomerate of companies, and yet, instead of laughing, Teratsuki replied, "You just might be right" with a dispassionate tone. Just across from him, Kageyama's face turned pale and flush all at once.

Rei tried to change the subject. "Well, I really don't care about what this place looks like. The taste of the food however..."

"You really are the cooking coordinator, aren't you?"

Semigasawa's conclusion made Rei glare at him a bit.

“I suppose,” She nodded.

“Taste, huh...” Tosuke twisted his head around, his face implying that he was still reluctant to agree.

Eventually, the appetizers arrived, and everyone immediately started eating. Though, Tosuke moved at a snail’s pace compared to the rest of the group. He was having a hard time using a knife and fork, and while he tried watching everyone else and imitating their movements, he still somehow had trouble progressing through the meal.

“Ahh!” Tosuke exclaimed as his hand slipped and his knife hit the plate with an audible clang.

All around him, guests at other tables stared at him quizzically, but the person they were looking at kept single-mindedly clanging against his plate without a care in the world. His concentration made it seem like he was just messing around.

Those inclined to side with Kageyama looked on the scene unpleasantly, but Rei was unfazed, and Semigasawa sat there grinning.

Then, Teratsuki asked, “Did Norisuke ever teach you how to use those?”

“—No, he did, but I forgot.”

As Tosuke’s eating difficulties continued, he suddenly had a major breakthrough in the form of putting a bite into his mouth. Semigasawa applauded.

“Ah, well done Tosuke! So, how does it taste?”

“Taste? Hmmmm, I’m not really sure.” He said with an uncertain expression.

“.....Who’s Norisuke?” Rei asked.”

“Oh, right, Norisuke is...”

“Kigawa Norisuke. He was Tosuke’s father, but he passed away.” It seemed like Tosuke was going to say something about it, so Teratsuki interjected. “He was an acquaintance of mine as well, and a good man.”

“Hm...?” Rei didn’t look like she was satisfied with that answer. That moment was the first time Tosuke’s origins had weighed on her

mind.

After that, the next few dishes came out one after the other, and Tosuke ate those carelessly as well; however, Teratsuki had influence, so not a single person, from the staff to the guests, took any reproach against him.

“.....You know, I really can’t tell what it’s supposed to be.”
Tosuke seemed to groan as he stuffed his mouth full of some sea bass that had been baked into a pie. “Is this kinda thing supposed to be good?”

“Well, it’s not bad. I don’t think so anyway.” Over on Rei’s end of the table, she was meticulously cutting apart her meal and spoke as she skillfully consumed it all. “The sea bass is good, and they didn’t waste it by putting something else in there to mask it.”

“.....I don’t get it. Am I just too used to sweets?” Tosuke was like a monkey storing feed in his cheeks.

“You’re just ignorant to what’s outside of your expertise. Am I wrong?”

“.....Hmm.” Tosuke still didn’t seem satisfied by Rei’s response.

Teratsuki let his gaze fall on Tosuke and stared at him with bright eyes.

“Now, Semigasawa,” as the meal reached a break point, Teratsuki struck up a conversation.

“Yes?” Semigasawa raised his head at his naming being called.

“How is your current assignment going?”

“It’s going well. I’m really putting everything into it.” He wasn’t lying. Semigasawa found it just as fulfilling as some of the more motivated people at the table.

“I see, is that any different from the other work you’ve had?”

“Oh, well, honestly, I haven’t felt like this in a long time. So much of it feels so rewarding.”

“Is that so? ...Well, how about this then, would you like to work on the shop full time?” Teratsuki’s words and tone were gentle, the full weight of a man with his social standing hid amongst their layers of subtlety.

“...I think that could work.” Semigasawa’s response was vague.

“I’m going to be honest with all of you. I’m thinking about cutting ties with MCE’s ice cream division and making it an independent entity.” Teratsuki’s announcement came out of nowhere.

Tosuke in particular was visibly surprised.

“But Kyouichirou, that’s...”

“Here me out, please. As it stands, I’m way more involved with this division than any other. It’s not normal, and it doesn’t look good to the rest of the company. If I’m going to satisfy all the other divisions of the company, I think making this place independent from MCE is the best solution,” Teratsuki continued, ignoring Tosuke. “And Semigasawa, when that happens, this place is going to need someone with experience to take an executive role. I think you’re that person.”

“... I see. You’ve clearly thought about this a lot.” Semigasawa smiled. “Could I have some time to think about it?”

“That’s no problem at all.”

“...” Kageyama watched the whole scene play out intently. Teratsuki had already confided in him some time ago, and he was fairly confident that Semigasawa would accept Teratsuki’s offer.

Rei remained silent.

If the store became its own company, Rei’s position within it would change, and there was no doubt in her mind that it’d be a fairly high-ranking one at that. Though, if she was excited, she didn’t show it and merely sipped her coffee instead.

“...So, what does this all mean?” Tosuke was the only other person at the table with any sort of reaction. He was clearly lost and confused.

“It’s just formalities. Boring stuff.” Teratsuki turned to Tosuke and explained.

“...Huh,” Tosuke seemed worried. “Well, if it’s just formalities, you’re not going anywhere, right Kyouichirou?” The others turned to him, shocked by how openly he spoke.

But Teratsuki wasn’t fazed by it at all. “Well, it really doesn’t matter if I’m there or not,” He proclaimed.

Tosuke was clearly relieved by his words. “You should stay then. It gets kinda lonely when you aren’t here.”

“All right, look,” Rei cut in quickly following Tosuke’s off-hand comment, “The Chairman’s giving us an opportunity to run this business ourselves, we should—”

“I don’t really care. I don’t get stuff like that, but I do get that Kouichirou gave me a place to work. Sure, I can make ice cream for others as much as I want, but, really, I want Kyouichirou to taste it the most.” Tosuke said with a beaming smile.

Rei couldn’t say a word; she was completely disarmed by Tosuke’s complete defenselessness.

“It’s an honor.” Teratsuki responded with a nod.

“Oh, I know! You should come over to my place later. I’ve got a special batch of ice cream just for you. Wanna come try it? Please?”

“Ah, I’d love too, but I have business to take care of later today. Some other time, perhaps.”

“Oh, OK... stuff happens I guess.” Tosuke seemed incredibly disappointed.

Teratsuki gave him a warm smile.

“So, uhh, sir, I heard you’ve been working on project for some new venture.” Semigasawa did his best to change the subject, and therefore the atmosphere.

“Ah, yes. I’ve had a building under construction for while some time now, but I think it’s finally going to be ready soon. I’ve been thinking about what I’m going to do with it when it opens for a while now. I hope it goes well.” Teratsuki finished off his statement with a grin. A cold grin that seemed nigh impenetrable. It was a look that exuded confidence; though, there was something about it that dared anyone to try and break that confidence. It was a grin with many layers, more than what the people at the table realized.

The meal ended not too long after that. After which, in the lounge of the main lobby, Teratsuki pulled Tosuke aside for some parting words.

“I’m serious though, the moment I make something really amazing, you’re going to be the first to taste it, so look forward to it!”

“I’m sure it’ll be great.” Teratsuki nodded. But then, he lowered

his voice to a hush and said. “Hey, Tosuke.”

“Hm? What’s up?” Tosuke replied, casually.

“How do you feel about the world?”

“Feel... what do you mean?”

“Do you feel like you’re confident enough to fight the world if you had to?” Teratsuki’s face was stern.

“What? You know, you said something like that when we first met... Well, if you’re talking about my ice cream, I’m definitely going to make sure everyone in the world thinks it’s great. It’ll happen someday, just you wait!”

“I see... You know what, I think that’ll do.” Teratsuki could only nod with the same serious expression as before.

Tosuke didn’t know what to think of Teratsuki’s sudden question and expression. All he could do was let out an embarrassed laugh.

* * * * *

...And that was the last time the two would ever meet. A few weeks later, Teratsuki Kyouichirou would find himself the subject of a sudden and mysterious death.

When she was assigned this story, Furukita Sonoko didn't expect anything more than the typical promotional interview, but, according to her hair stylist, the ice cream they served was absolutely fantastic. So good, in fact, that it completely changed the way she thought about ice cream. Sokoko couldn't help being a bit intrigued by that.

The up and coming celebrity idol debuted around 2 years ago; though, in that time, no one bothered to give her any work that would make her stand out. They kept giving her stories like "Around Japan in 80 Meals" and "A Little House Near the Train Station."¹⁰ She didn't have any real presence on variety shows either, so she rarely got called up on them.

"I'm not so sure about this. I don't really like ice cream; it's too sweet. I'm really just not a fan of sweets in general, actually. I mean, I don't even like cakes." Sonoko grumbled while her hair was groomed for the camera.

Her stylist smirked. "Just give a try. You can even act like no one told you about it if that makes you feel better. Just don't act too surprised and make it seem fake, okay?"

The ice cream parlor that served as the backdrop for her interview had been getting a lot of attention lately. Apparently, they'd just finished up their 'trial period' and are trying to expand nationwide. Sonoko was hoping to get in on this sooner rather than later; it might just be the next big thing.

After finishing her makeup, she stepped outside her van and saw a crowd of people surrounding the parlor. Well, it was more like a stall really, but people crowded around it regardless. Cameras tended to garner these sorts of crowds. Anything to be on camera.

She started over towards where she was supposed to meet the shop's manager and director. When she arrived, she let out a cheery "Good~ Morning!" though, she quickly found that her cheery greeting didn't quite fit the mood.

"Look, if this keeps up neither of us are going to get the coverage we want."

“Yes but understand that the coverage you want isn’t what we agreed on.”

“How am I supposed to understand when you’re not making any sense!”

Sonoko asked the AD next to her what was going on.

“Well, it has to do with how the shop looks. You noticed that it’s horror themed, right?”

“Oh yeah, I just noticed. There’s, like, ghosts and stuff on it. Why?”

“Some of the crew want to home in on that angle. They want the interview to be about what makes people drawn to such a creepy place. The shop’s manager didn’t take that very well.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah... looks like it’s going to take a while,” the AD complained.

Sonoko just shrugged. “Well whatever. I’m just going to wait then. I’ll be in the van, so call me when you need me.” After that, she headed back to the van.

However, on her way back, she caught a glimpse of a lone clown sitting on a bench by the roadside. He wasn’t wearing a red nose or crazy hair, so it was more like a jester, but his face was painted green with star patterns around his eyes. His features were well defined as well. It all made him feel almost like a doll.

He seemed to be staring at something in Sonoko’s direction. He looked pretty worn down.

Sonoko couldn’t stand leaving him like that, so she approached him.

“Hi there! Do you happen to work over at that ice cream stand by any chance?” She noticed that the colors of his outfit happened to match the shop’s, so she asked him.

“Hm? Ah, yeah. I guess you could say that. And you are... Ahh, you must be from the TV station. Yeah... they did say you’d be coming, didn’t they?” he replied. He sounded distracted though, like all of his attention was focused on the shop just behind Sonoko.

“Working part time with that kind of crowd must be tough, huh?”

“Eh, I guess you could say that,” he said, offhandedly. “I wonder.

Why is everyone so eager to have our ice cream?"

"Huh?... Don't they want it because they like the taste?"

"Do you think it tastes good?" he asked; though, it didn't seem like he really cared.

"Uhh... Well, actually, I haven't tried any yet."

"So you didn't come to report on it 'cause you like it, huh?" He let out a chuckle, but it felt hollow and lonely. "Well then let's see... If you do try it, I'd say get the rum raisin."

"...What makes you say that? Also, I'm not really into strong flavors."

"I don't know about that... but, of course, it might not end up mattering anyway," he said, absently. "You don't really like ice cream, right?"

Sonoko couldn't help but hesitate for a moment.

"Well, I don't really hate it but... well, honestly, I'm just not really good with sweets." His languid speech had started to wear down on her; so much so, that she felt like telling the truth. Soon after, she realized that she shouldn't have given in like that. She was about to do an interview, after all. Even so, despite her misgivings, the man remained completely impassive.

"Ah, that makes sense... Yeah, rum 'n' raisin sounds about right." He muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's 'cause you don't like sweets. And... and that means you need something really sweet to get through all that pain. Haha, yeah, just like Norisuke!"

To Sonoko, his muttering was pretty much incomprehensible, but he didn't really seem dangerous. He was strange, sure, but not unreasonable. Maybe it was because of how calm he was.

"..." *He's a weird one*, she thought.

"Hey, what's going on over there?" He shifted his attention towards the TV director and the shop's staff.

"Oh, that. We're all just not seeing eye-to-to at the moment, apparently..."

"Really? They really shouldn't be so stubborn." He stood up just as

he finished his statement.

“Huh?” Sonoko, meanwhile, was left perplexed as he walked over to the shop’s staff; then, someone shouted in surprise.

“B-boss?!” The manager yelped, letting his voice crack.

“Is whatever you’re talking about really so important? Just let them do their thing.”

Sonoko’s pupils shrunk to tiny points as she listened to the two men speak.

Did... Did he just say “boss”? That clown was their boss? She’d lost all ability to comprehend what was happening.

“You’re Kigawa-san then, correct?” Asked the TV director. Kigawa Tosuke nodded.

“I really don’t care about how you want to portray the shop; I just want one thing.”

“And what is that?”

He pointed over towards Sonoko. “I want her to be the one to taste my ice cream.”

Sonoko practically leapt out of her skin. “M-me?”

“That’s not a problem at all,” The director nodded. “Why do you ask?”

Tosuke smiled. “I hope you don’t mind, but I wanted to give her something special. I’ve got just the thing.”

“T-that was mean! I didn’t know you were their boss!” Sonoko whispered to Tosuke mere minutes before they were going to start filming.

“I guess I am, but I really just make the ice cream. I let Kageyama do all the manager stuff. I really don’t do a lot,” he smirked. This man, a man dressed like a clown, was the top shareholder of the entire company.

“You look really young. Mind if I ask your age?”

“Well, I’m Twenty according to the family registry.”

“Wha- Twenty!? That’s only 2 years younger than I am!”

“I don’t think it’s a big deal. You’ve seen a lot more than I have, so I’d say you’re a lot older than me.”

“...?” His comments were still just as strange.

“Sonoko, get ready!” Some one called out and broke her train of thought. She called out a prompt “Got it!” in reply.

“Well, time to start. Go easy on me, okay?” Tosuke said before moving to his own position.

“Okay, Starting in 5!”

And after a short count down, the cameras were rolling.

“Ah, yes, that’s right. Today, we’re in front of the shop that everyone’s been talking about!” She gave the shop a short little introduction and gave the camera a smile all the while. She didn’t real have a reason to though, it was just what she always did. “...Now, with that out of the way, let’s take a look at the shop! Look’s pretty spooky huh? I’m getting chills! Though, maybe that’s just the ice cream. Speaking of ice cream, let’s go have a taste!”¹¹

As she looked towards the counter, Tosuke handed her a cup of ice cream from behind it.

It wasn’t rum ‘n’ raisin at all. Despite Tosuke’s earlier recommendation, it was Tosuke’s own specialty: mint chocolate chip. It was marbled with white streaks; he probably mixed it with some vanilla.

Sonoko was surprised, of course, but they were on air. She just had to let it side and press on.

“So, what flavor do you have more me today?”

“Well, it’s not on sale yet, so think of it as a trial-run. If you try it and like it, I might even put it on the menu.” Tosuke’s face beamed with anticipation. Despite all the weird make up and clothes, the smile on his handsome face was almost as sweet as his ice cream.

“O-oh, wow... Th-that’s quite the responsibility. Whew, getting kinda nervous!” She paused and looked around. This wasn’t part of the plan, but the camera rolled on and no one stepped in. The director must have been alright with the change. “Alright then, let’s have a taste...”

Timidly, she brought the tip of her tongue to the pale green substance and gave it a lick. It wasn’t very sweet. She was relieved by that fact, until — BAM! — the next moment a sweetness filled her

entire mouth like a blow to the head. It had been concealed by the flavor of the mint.

“Whoa...!” She pulled her mouth away out of surprise. But for some reason, her mouth moved straight back to the ice cream of its own will and bit right into it. There was the sensation of the ice cream melting in her mouth, then another surprise: sweetness receded. Just when she thought that the impact of the mint would amplify the wave of sweetness, it vanished just like that. It was like magic.

“H-how do I describe this...? I-It’s...such a strange flavor...” she said, inadvertently taking another bite. “But...but it’s good. Yeah, really good! It’s almost like...”

She looked up to speak but stopped. For a moment, she was at a loss for words. Her hand started trembling violently before letting the ice cream in her hand drop onto her clothes.

“A-ahh!”

It made her come back to her senses. And not a moment later, she started panicking. Though, the camera didn’t stop. Audiences found accidents like this amusing, so they tended to draw in more ratings.

“Oh no, what should I...!”

The camera held on Sonoko throughout her panicked frenzy. Eventually, the entire situation was resolved, and after a few closing words, filming finally wrapped up.

“I’m so sorry about that. I really screwed that up didn’t I...” Sonoko bowed her head, utterly dejected, in front of Tosuke.

“Actually, It looks like everyone liked it,” Tosuke said. He was giggling, just like most of the crew. “You’re pretty funny, you know that? Must be popular.”

“No, I’m really not...” Sonoko shook her head meekly. “I was just clumsy, a total mess.”

“Come on, it was good, really! ...Oh, by the way, how was the ice cream? Good?”

“Yeah!” Suddenly, she nodded her head with a fair amount of force. “It was so. Damn. Good!”

“Oh yeah? Then what were you about to say?”

“Oh that... I was, uh, going to say something... strange. It’s

actually the reason I dropped it...”

“Well then, tell me. I want to know.”

“But...”

“You know,” as Sonoko stammered on, Tosuke said, “that ice cream was actually supposed to be for someone else. But they died.”

“What?” Tosuke’s statement was so out of left field it left Sonoko shocked.

“That means you’re the only one who’s ever tried it. I really want to know what you think.”

“...”

“Still don’t want to?” Tosuke looked straight into Sonoko’s eyes, like he was peering into their depths, his own eyes full of wonder.

“Alright... But promise me you won’t laugh.”

“I can do that. I promise.” Tosuke nodded happily.

Sonoko mustered up the courage to speak before saying, “It was like... Like I was eating the Earth whole. That’s what I felt anyway.”

Tosuke’s face stiffened.

“...W-wait, what did you say?”

“Ah, s-sorry! It really was too weird, wasn’t it?” Sonoko flinched at Tosuke’s serious reaction, but he didn’t seem to care about that at all.

“Y-you actually felt like you were eating the world?!”

“Uh, n-no... nothing like that. It just... That’s what I felt. But maybe... yeah. The world might be right, something big and vast...” She couldn’t tell which was really being consumed -- The world, or her -- But either way, it felt like she’d melted away with the world, melding and seeping into each other, becoming one... That was the feeling she had. “...It doesn’t really make any sense, does it? But it really surprised me. Really.” As she spoke, she slowly found herself wanting more. Even the mere thought of it resurrected the feeling she had, and her eyes started to glaze over.

“The world, huh...? Interesting.” Tosuke nodded in thought. “Well, I’m glad you got to try it, even though Kyouichirou never got the chance...”

“Are you going to sell it?” Sonoko asked the burning question on her mind.

“Hmm... It’d be kinda tough.”

“But it’s so good! I’m sure people will like it.” Sonoko said that, but deep down she thought about how nice it’d be if it never went on sale. She could have it all to herself.

“It’s just so expensive. Making a dish like that would set us back 100,000 Yen per serving.”

“That much!?” And she’d just dropped it. What a waste...

“Though, I suppose mass producing it would lower costs...” He said, letting himself grin.

“Really?!” Sonoko’s eyes lit up.

“Yeah. You know, seeing someone like you eating my ice cream makes all this worth it.” Tosuke nodded, his spirits high.

“Well now, aren’t you pleased with yourself.” After Setsuko, Sonoko’s stylist, saw Sonoko coming back to the van with a huge grin on her face, she started prodding.

“Yeah! I couldn’t be happier right now!” She was beaming from ear to ear.

Setsuko started wondering if the shops owner was hitting on her; her elation was so obvious it was kinda sickening.

“You know, that last take we got was really good” Setsuko noted.

“Really?”

“Mhm. It really showed how much you like it. You messed up, sure, but wasn’t really funny. It was more like, ‘woah, it’s that good huh?’”

“Oh come on, could you not talk about that stupid accident!”

“Haha, sorry, but it’s true. And that’s not all, it --...” She tried to continue, but she suddenly stopped talking. She felt like she was about to say something really strange.

“What?”

“Oh, uhh, it’s nothing.” Setsuko shook her head in reply.

After that, the director, cameraman, and the rest of the crew started returning from wrapping up the shoot. The girls finished up their talk and sat back down in their seats. On the bumpy ride home, Setsuko couldn’t help but think about what she was going to say.

Back there, it looked like you were eating the world, the world was eating you, and the two of you melted away together...

But... why would she think of something like that...?

* * * * *

...So, it's pretty obvious that, the first signs of out wizard's "magic" were starting to take form within Sonoko. Yeah, hehe, right there, in that young and pretty, yet plain and inconspicuous little lady.

* * * * *

Following these events, Furukita Sonoko started commuting to Tosuke Kigawa's office as his new product assurance tester. Her job wasn't to taste the ice cream currently on the market though. Rather, her responsibility was to taste Tosuke's new creations and evaluate them. Of course, she wasn't exactly fond of sweet things, as she had mentioned before, so her opinions tended to stray from those of the shop's usual clientele.

One time, she tried their 'Rainbow Fresh,' an ice cream made with various fruit sauces and chocolate. It was their most popular treat at the time, but when she tried it, she couldn't say anything better than, "Honestly? It just tastes sorta messy."

Tosuke was the one making it all, of course, and while he smiled wryly at each piece of feedback she gave, he still welcomed her with a bright smile whenever she came

However, there was someone that didn't take too kindly to Sonoko's visits. Ever since Sonoko had started coming over, Kusunoki Rei had been on the receiving end of a constant stream of criticism, all of which claimed that her creations were "too sweet."

"Alright, what the hell is going on here?" she finally asked Tosuke one day.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about that woman! What were you thinking, putting her on as a focus tester? She has no idea what she's doing, and her

feedback is useless!”

“I don’t know about that. She’s got a pretty good sense of taste actually.”

“That’s not the point, her taste is too different than everyone else’s. If you follow her feedback, you’re just going to get complaints from the rest of our customers!”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that. But aren’t you worrying too much? I mean, I’m thinking outside the box like you told me too, aren’t I?” Tosuke didn’t really seem to care about any of it. It was like he didn’t even bother to realize how angry Rei was.

“That is *not* what I meant by that!”

“Oh, actually, she did really like that almond cream one you made the other day,” he said with a chuckle. Rei stifled a frustrated breath, before finally sighing.

“... Whatever. Just don’t blame me if she starts making trouble.”

“Hm? What trouble?”

“Wha -- ... Have you even noticed how popular she’s been getting lately?” she spouted in a vitriolic burst.

She was right. Oddly enough, Furukita Sonoko was getting popular despite never having been all that noticeable before.

“It’s so relaxing to see her smile”

“She’s just so refreshing, you know?”

“I keep thinking, ‘ahh, I want to smile like she does some day.’”

Those kinds of overwhelmingly positive comment started popping up one after the other; she even had people talking about her on TV and radio stations... She’d become a household name almost overnight, and no one who knew her before could really pin down exactly what had changed about her. However, it was clear that she’d changed somehow, and that change had charmed everyone. And then, one day...

“Hahaha, alright, alright. But hey, Sonoko. Tell me, have you always been like this?” One day, she’d been asked to appear as a guest on some TV program. During the interview, the host had asked her this.

“Huh? Like what?” She laughed, teasing the host back.

“Well, how do I put this? I mean, you just seem like an air-head.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, I haven’t really been thinking about much at all lately.”

“Wait, you used to think before?”

“Ah! Rude!” she said, laughing, “but let’s see... I think it’s just ‘cause I don’t really have anything to worry about anymore. They just drifted away. Now I don’t bother thinking too hard about stuff.”

“So what’s your secret, then?”

“Secret, come on, there’s no secret!”

“Really? Come on, there must be *something*...”

“I’m serious, there isn’t!”

“Okay, then what about your image? You just seem so stress free. How do you relieve your stress?”

“Hmm... I don’t really have anything... Ah! Actually...”

“Ohhh? Go on...”

“So, I’m not much of a sweets fan, you know, but I actually have ice cream sometimes. It’s a very specific flavor.”

“Ice cream? Like, chocolate ice cream or something?”

“No no no, it’s... it’s made by this guy, and, well, I guess he makes it just for me. Oh, but he does sell it publicly!”

“Really now? Is it sold at a store?”

“I probably shouldn’t give any details. It could cause some trouble.”

“I see, I see... Ice cream huh? You know, you’re actually kind of like ice cream. You’re just so wispy, melty and creamy.”

“Oh, yeah, you might have a point there. I kinda feel the same way. Maybe I’m the reincarnation of an ice cream cone or something.”

“Reborn from food eh? What would I be?”

“Um, lemme think..... yakiniku12?”

“Hmm... so fatty and greasy huh? Well, I do like me some yakiniku.”

The surrounding staff and audience roared with laughter.

... After a while, appearances like this became regular, and Tosuke

Kigawa suddenly found his ice cream more popular than ever. His stall was never mentioned, but it was only a matter of time before it was identified. Sonoko had done a story on it after all, so it would have been weirder if people *didn't* figure it out. The fuse had been lit a long time ago, and now his popularity was exploding. His ice cream was now a sensation.

Customers practically mobbed every store, to the point where special tickets had to be issued in certain locations. The stall's issues had gone from not being able to move enough ice cream, to not having enough of it.

And as the interest in his ice cream grew, so too did the interest in its creator. The genius confectioner was only 20 years old, handsome enough to be a movie star, and had inherited the company from the late Teratsuki Kyouichirou himself. Given these elements, it would have been stranger if people didn't make him a hot topic.

Meanwhile, Semigasawa – the coordinator for this mess – sat cradling his head in his hands. He was trying to figure out how to handle his director's image.

"I mean, I'm glad he's getting popular and all, but this is getting silly," he said, pouring his worries onto Kageyama. "Everyone and their dog are asking him for an interview."

"What's the problem? Just accept them."

"The problem is that it's Kigawa! Who knows what he's going to say? I keep refusing them but they just keep asking..."

"Alright, then accept them, but give him a script to read; make him memorize it. That should work."

"I really don't think he'd go along with that," he said before he let out a long, deep sigh. "... Is he still holed up in the development room?"

"Yeah, he's still immersed in making ice cream. All his effort's going into the stuff Furukita Sonoko's been testing."

"... Our confectionary expert isn't exactly in the best spot either. How's she holding up? Tosuke and her managing to get along?"

"Beats me, but my guess is not well..."

“If everything goes on like this, I feel like it’s all going to go downhill...” Semigasawa was nibbling on the ends of his fingernails.

* * * * *

Hey, get a load of this. There’s this story by some guy named Kurt Vonnegut – and trust me, this guy writes some weird shit – called “Cat’s Cradle.” In it, there’s this crazy stuff called “Ice-Nine” that carries a “pattern of crystallization in which molecules freeze at above room temperature.” It’s all a bunch of bullshit, but, basically, if it touches water, the molecules restructure and, just like that, everything turns to Ice-Nine and the world freezes over. It’s like, holy shit dude, where do you come up with this stuff? In the story, it’s what caused the end of the world.

Like I said, it’s all bullshit, but there is actually something in the real world that kinda works like the stuff. It can’t cause the end of the world or anything, but it can change the world.

Wanna know what it is? It’s the way people live their lives.

See, when people get introduced to a new, more efficient way of life, they just drop how they lived before and swap it out with the new one. I’m not shitting you, pretty much every product of modern civilization has appeared within the last century at most, and yet most of these things have changed the world. This pattern is all about what goes on in our heads... or, well, more like how we see shit. It’s kinda like when you go, “man, I wish I could have what that guy does,” and then everyone fucking has it. The way people think is the exact same way. A lot of people don’t even think about other people lying on the street, but that’s just ‘cause no one else gives a shit either. It’s established. And the truth is most people just live their lives according to these patterns. Trust me, there are a ton of examples. But, really, it all just comes down to the thought that “man, I wish I had that.”

...Okay, I’m taking a long time to get to it, but my point is that Furikawa Sonoko is kinda like Ice-Nine. She may have only played a small part, but the girls watching her interactions with celebrities started wanting to be like her. They’d mimic her speech, her behavior, her attitude, and that imitation was starting to take hold as a pattern.

... Course, you're probably wondering what would end up happening to Sonoko 'cause of all this, aren'tcha? Hehehe... Well, are you?

The first time journalist Nonomura Haruto met the CEO, he was instantly left wide-eyed and speechless.

“U-uh... That make-up...”

“It’s just my fashion sense.” Kigawa Tosuke had welcomed Haruto with his typical clown makeup on. Of course, it was actually almost entirely natural, save for the tear-shaped marks painted beneath his eyes.

They were alone in the CEO’s office, but it was so wide and open that it felt strangely deserted. There were virtually no real furnishings other than the sofas on which they sat, facing each other. Within this room, the eccentric-looking Tosuke looked very...out of place.

“I-I see... Erm. Shall we start by taking a photo?” Haruto said while holding his camera. His finger was already pressing against the shutter button.

“Go ahead. So, you’re the one that takes the pictures?”

“That’s right. I do interviews and a few other things, but photography’s my main line of work,” he answered, shooting photos as he spoke. After he’d taken a good number of them, he looked up from the view-finder.

“Thank you very much.”

“Your letter was really interesting! I would’ve loved to meet you earlier, but it was kinda hard to get Suguru to give the go-ahead.”

“Suguru...? Ah, you mean Mr. Semigasawa. I’m very grateful that he gave us permission to do this.”

“What was the headline you had planned? ‘Magicians of the Modern Age’?”

“Yes, that’s the direction I was considering. Well then, I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for me.”

“Oh yeah? If it’s about how I make my ice cream, I’d be delighted tell you all about it. Above all, the most important thing is that you mix it well...”

“Ah, no, it’s not going to be quite as technical as that.” Haruto shook his head with a weak smile, then slowly fixed his eyes upon

Tosuke and began asking his questions. His tape recorder had been running from the moment he entered the room. “What made you decide to make your own, unique, brand of ice cream? It’s pretty peculiar, wouldn’t you say?”

“I mean, I make it because it’s tasty. It is, isn’t it?” he replied in a laid-back manner.

“Yes, that’s very true, but I imagine it takes a brave sort to be able to market those kinds of flavors to the public. The production costs are very high, aren’t they?”

“My very talented staff takes care of that problem. But it’s true, it does seem to cost a lot of money.”

“And yet despite that, you’re still trying to raise the quality even higher? I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but you must be cutting some corners? For someone with your level of expertise, I mean.”

“Hmm, I don’t really get what you mean by that, but if it tastes good, it tastes good, right? It’s actually hard for me to try and make it anything but.”

“So, you’re saying it isn’t a strategic approach?”

“Mmm... Well, I guess I’m not thinking especially deeply about it, no.”

“Do you perhaps have some kind of conviction that your customers have come to expect a certain level of quality?”

“I think I have! If I make it the right way, then people are sure to come and enjoy it. That’s definitely something I’ve thought, yeah!” Tosuke nodded to his words as he spoke. It was hard to tell whether he really knew what he was talking about.

“And how do you work out what they like? You must have done some extensive research.”

“It’s the pain, actually.”

“Huh?”

“The pain people feel deep in their hearts. If I make my ice cream with that in mind, it’s guaranteed to be something they’ll like.”

“...That’s very metaphorical.”

“Really? You think so?”

“By pain, do you mean something like, the stress that people in

modern society all share?”

“I don’t know much about modern society, but it’s something that’s faintly there in everyone, isn’t it? Like it’s clutching at your heart, that sort of feeling.”

“Er, well...”

Even as Haruto struggled to find the right words, Tosuke continued with his beautiful lilting voice.

“It’s either that, or no one’s realized it at all. But it’s there for sure. So, when everyone’s forgotten it and then it shows up again right before them, they’re surprised and then find themselves enjoying my ice cream.”

“...Y-you’re saying that you feel it’s your mission to respond to your customers’ needs? That there’s some kind of latent demand?” Haruto did his best to try and wring out the question by force.

“Mission? What do you mean by that?” Tosuke eyed him suspiciously.

“Something you feel you need to do. Like a...sort of pressing feeling.”

“...Huh? I don’t get it.” Tosuke just stared blankly. At this point, Haruto was starting to feel like he should wrap up the conversation.

“...All right, then. Now let’s presume, just hypothetically, that you had some kind of problem. What might that be?”

“A problem, huh...” Tosuke folded his arms, thinking. “You mean like something getting in the way?”

“Yes, that’s right. You don’t seem to have any rival competitors right now, but if there was one thing you felt you had to improve upon, what do you think that would be?”

“...The ice cream, I guess?” he mumbled. “I’d want it to taste even better—or, I could even make something different.”

Haruto’s eyes widened, seeing how serious Tosuke was.

“Really? But everyone says they’re really delighted with the current flavors. If you change them, there could be backlash.”

“I know that... I know, but still...” Tosuke muttered, mouth puckered and frowning deeply. “The way it is now, I can watch as many people as I want, but that won’t heal the pain in *my* heart, will

it?”

“...Pardon?”

“Back when I was making ice cream for Norisuke and Kyouichiro, I never felt any pain. Now that I’m with all these people, it’s been hard not to feel like this... Wherever I turn, there’s people eating my ice cream. In many ways, it’s starting to feel like everyone’s stabbing me in the heart with a knife. I wonder if there’s really no way to do something about this pain... If all I’m doing is making it for people to enjoy, I’ll never be able to make any progress!”

“Uh...um...”

“I’ve been having thoughts like these a lot when I give things for *her* to taste. She responds well, but no matter how much it cheers her up, the pain I get from her doesn’t go away—it gets worse. Figures, huh? Maybe the more sensitive I become to pain, the more others start to think that it doesn’t matter to them...”

Tosuke wasn’t talking one-to-one with Haruto anymore, but merely rambling on by himself.

* * * * *

...So yeah, most of Tosuke’s interaction with the outside world went something like that, disconnected to the point of absurdity. Still, Nonomura Haruto was a consummate professional. He couldn’t disappoint Semigasawa, who had given him the OK, so he put together a complete article. Although, it mentioned things Tosuke himself had never actually said:

“I’m very serious about the ice cream I make. Today’s society is so rife with uncertainty that there’s a need for luxury items like ice cream to exist in order to relieve the pain in people’s hearts.”

When Tosuke himself read it, he tilted his head in puzzlement.

In any case, this particular publication was very well received, and the article was quoted all over the place, spreading the general opinion that, although Kigawa Tosuke was an oddball, he was also a very diligent individual. Even though they weren’t actually his own words. If he’d spent the rest of his days making ice cream, maybe nothing would have happened. Oh, if only he’d chosen to do that...

Now then, let me tell you what happened around, say, three months after he'd started feeding Furukita Sonoko ice cream...

* * * * *

...*Huh?*

Suddenly, Sonoko couldn't recall who the man standing in front of her was.

"What would you like today, miss?"¹³

She couldn't focus on his question as she wondered who he even was. In fact, *where* was she, anyway?

"Y-yes, sorry," she apologized reflexively. But the next moment, she remembered that she was in a restaurant and that the person before her was a waiter attempting to take her order.

The waiter stifled a laugh upon hearing her confused answer, but it was clear that he bore no malice and had simply found it endearing.

"Wow, what am I saying? Let's see..."

She opened the menu and chose her desired meal, her cheeks slightly flushed from embarrassment.

"You're funny," snickered her senpai, a female celebrity, sitting behind her.

"Seems like I've been spacing out a lot lately. I must look really dumb, huh?" Sonoko replied with an embarrassed titter.

"Huh, so you're actually that ditzy? And here I thought your airheaded-ness was just an act," the man at the same table laughed too.

"I mean, I'm *trying* for it to be an act," she said, wondering exactly who these people were.

She just couldn't remember. She was sure she'd just been introduced to them, but it was as if all the information on them had vanished from her head.

"You've become quite the star lately, though, Furukita-chan. In no small part due to your dopey-ness."

"Thank you," she replied with a smile.

"Hold on, I don't think that's a compliment, sweetie. He's making fun of you, isn't he?" her senpai said with a grin. Come to think of it,

Sonoko couldn't remember her name either.

"Oh, is that so?" she said, and everyone laughed.

"All right, here's to the future success of our new job!"

The man raised a glass, and the two women followed along.

"To success!"

And as they all clinked their glasses, the only thought on Sonoko's mind was, *who are these people...?*

She couldn't remember the reason for her being in the restaurant at all, either. Still, she ate her meal calmly, nodding, laughing along and joking with the other two, almost forgetting the very fact that she couldn't recall who they were.

Sometimes, she also forgot what she was doing during some of her television recordings. Naturally, this meant that she'd forget her lines, but she'd usually somehow manage to grasp an idea of the context and improvise her way out of the situation. There were times that didn't work out, of course, but on those occasions the staff just pinned it on her simply spacing out, finding it amusing.

Even having forgotten their names, she could form decent responses to their questions. Things she didn't know, she could bluff her way through, and the conversation could advance... She wasn't thinking this out of contempt, but rather, she just believed that she could play along fine if she matched the feelings of the other party. Even if she had forgotten their name, their position — everything, she could still understand those feelings. And because of that, her answers felt like they came from the heart. Others often saw her as smart, someone with a sense of humor, but in reality, she was only covering up for her own forgetfulness.

It goes without saying that this all began after she'd met Kigawa Tosuke.

Surrounded by a pleasant mood, the meal went on until, at last, it was time for dessert: ice cream.

"Come to think of it, you're quite the ice cream gourmet, aren't you?" asked the man.

"What?! That's not true. All I did was eat some on TV and say how

content it made me feel.”

“You’re talking about Kigawa Tosuke’s ice cream, aren’t you? That place really is divine.”

“Oh, you’ve tried it too?”

“Once you’ve tried their ice cream, you can’t really go back to anything else. Though I must admit, this dessert isn’t half bad either...” the woman said, tucking her spoon into the Italian gelato. Sonoko did the same, outwardly grinning along with the rest of them. However, she couldn’t help but feel that it was devoid of any flavor at all.

I’d really prefer to be eating Kigawa’s...

The moment that thought crossed her mind, she finally returned to her senses and, heaving a gasp, remembered who the two of them were.

That’s right. It’s the broadcast script writer that was the panel of judges that failed me back when I auditioned last year. And this woman was strongly rumored to be his lover...

At the time, she figured she had a pretty good chance of winning, but, she’d heard later on that he’d insisted on an amateur with personal connections to him. She’d harbored quite a grudge back then.

But how could she have forgotten that? Thinking back on it, the vexation she’d felt was clear as day once more. It was like a stab to her heart.

How...?

Left speechless, she stared vacantly at the two of them. That’s right. Now that she’d become popular, the broadcast script writer was trying to lay the groundwork so that he could prove himself useful to her in future. That’s what this meal was all about.

“...Hm? Is something wrong, Furukita?” the man inquired casually, seeing Sonoko’s face suddenly tense up.

“Ah, uh...it’s nothing. I think I may have eaten a little too much...” All she could do was shake her head awkwardly.

When Sonoko got home that night, she spewed up all the food she’d eaten during the meal. Panting and gasping, she suddenly

couldn't help but feel that everything in the world was utterly and absolutely detestable.

W-what's happening to me...?

Feelings of anger and rage were welling up inside her for no apparent reason. She felt awful.

While taking a bottle of mineral water from the fridge to rinse her throat, a thought entered her mind.

Oh yeah, I set a little aside last time, didn't I?

She then reached across to the freezer compartment and took a tub of ice cream out.

Though her mouth was still tingling from the convulsed contents of her stomach, she restlessly shoveled spoonfuls of the vanilla ice cream into it. Once she had a taste of that sweetness spreading across her mouth, her eyes narrowed and her body trembled.

"Ahh, so good..."

She felt her anger melting away along with the ice cream. A pleasant feeling, as if all the puzzle pieces in her fragmented heart were clicking back into place.

One mouthful was enough to content her, and she immediately returned the ice cream back to the freezer. It wasn't an addiction, more akin to a workman regaining his composure by holding a familiar tool in his hand after being made to use an unfamiliar one. To regain her own habits, her own patterns...

"Sheesh... Oh yeah, that's right, I..."

As relief filled her, she couldn't quite tell why it was she'd felt so incredibly angry earlier. So she'd had a falling out in the past. Big deal.

"Right? So dumb of me to get worked up over that. There's literally no point in holding a grudge against him now. Uhh... Him? Who was he again?"

She'd forgotten the man's name. But by that point, her interest had already waned.

"Well, whatever."

She walked down the corridor to fill the bathtub, humming to herself along the way.

...What does it mean to be “kind”?

The great Captain Walker’s transcended all this good and evil crap, so I don’t really know, but...if you’re gonna tell me it’s about not hating people, that it’s about helping them when they need it? Well then, what the hell makes it any different from turning a blind eye to people’s faults?

Say they have a “talent” – take a dog, for instance. It’s got a good nose, but it can’t see for shit. A bird can see for miles, but once it’s dark, it’s almost useless. It’s normal for things to be this way.

It’s easy to be kind to someone. You don’t have to know the slightest thing about them — heh heh, this is like some kind of hard-boiled proverb.

Where’s the problem, so long as they’re kind?

Hey, you know, maybe, just maybe, if he just went all the way and made everyone completely unable to understand each other, and no one gave a fuck, people might actually have some fun for once while they’re wondering who the hell everyone else was! Fuhihihihhihi.

...Now, the folk monitoring Tosuke, they’d only heard rumors of such a tendency. They’d heard about it, but they had no idea where the cause lay. They *vaguely* knew that Tosuke’s ice cream had something to do with it, but it wasn’t a proper drug, at any rate. When they analyzed it, they couldn’t even find a common base; like Tosuke said, “everyone has their own preferences.”

How are you supposed to work out something like that?

To get to the bottom of it, these guys decided to get a little rough. And the first thing they did to try and determine whether Kigawa Tosuke was the root of the tendency was some “sifting out”. A little refining of the components, the kind they always do in chemistry experiments. In simple terms, they wanted to see what would happen if Tosuke alone were to make the ice cream. And naturally, the first thing to remove was one whom Tosuke relied upon more than anyone else...

...It was late at night, and Tosuke was holed up in his special kitchen, testing his ice cream, as usual. The only light in the room shone on him, leaving the rest in pitch darkness.

“Hmm...” he’d grumble as he stirred the heated pan, occasionally stopping to scratch his head.

“Not the best I’ve done...” he muttered under his breath, when suddenly the whole room was flooded with light.

Startled, Tosuke jumped. When he turned around, Kusunoki Rei was standing there.

“W-waah!” Tosuke panicked. Since he was all alone, he didn’t have his face painted and he wasn’t wearing gloves. His greenness was laid bare.

“Evening.” Even witnessing him in that state, Rei spoke calmly.

“Ah, yeah. Good evening... I mean, this is, uh...”

“Same stupid face as ever, hands covered in peppermint sauce, right?”

“Huh? ...Uh, yeah, pretty much,” he nodded, prompting Rei to laugh through her nose.

“You’re such an idiot.”

“Uh...?”

“You think I didn’t know or something? I figured it out a long time ago.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve known exactly who you were for a long time now. Kigawa Norisuke may have acknowledged you as his child, but in the registry, the space where your mother’s name should have been was blank. Even you probably don’t know where you came from, do you?”

She looked fed up with him. Tosuke was bemused, but then began to laugh weakly.

“...Haha. Right. Of course you’d know... You’ve stuck by me for so long now. And you’re way smarter than me, too. Guess there wasn’t much point in me keeping it secret.” He dropped his head languidly.

“It’s bubbling,” Rei responded matter-of-factly.

“Huh?”

“The pan. It’s bubbling.” She pointed to the pan beside Tosuke, which he’d left on, and which was now frothing over.

“Wa-waaah!” Tosuke fumbled to turn off the heat. Rei sighed.

“You know, when you’re dumb, you’re really, really dumb.” Her tone was serious.

Having turned off the heat, Tosuke clammed up. “Sorry,” he muttered feebly.

“What are you being sorry for?”

“For not telling you. I should have told you straight up.”

“Hah! And if you had? What difference would it have made?” said Rei, shrugging her shoulders. “Ever since the day we first met, I never expected you to do something that smart.”

“Really?”

“Really. You’re such a damn fool.” She stared at him, then at last broke into a smile. “Guess that makes two of us. But you know what, you win.”

“But you’re no fool, Rei,” he said with a complex expression.

Rei frowned slightly, then looked away. “I wonder...”

The atmosphere was so sad, Tosuke began to dither.

“W-what’s the matter?”

“...Are you gonna be okay like this?” she said, turning back and staring straight at Tosuke. “You may be a genius, but you can be way too careless... But I guess if you weren’t, it wouldn’t be you anymore, would it?”

“...?”

Tosuke just blinked. He didn’t really understand.

“Uhh... Is there something you want from me, Rei?” he ventured to ask, but Rei shook her head.

“I don’t want you to do anything for me, not anymore. We’ve already done everything we could together. So, there’s no point in you trying to do anything else for me...” Rei’s voice was trembling slightly. “This is goodbye, Tosuke. That’s what I came here to tell you.”

Tosuke stood there, mouth agape. She turned her gaze away from

his defenseless state and continued.

“You know about my hobby, don’t you? My interest in images associated with death. I’ll tell you why I’m so interested in that. I came this close to death when I was little. When I was abroad, I got caught up in a war. My parents died there.”

“...”

“They were managers of a branch office in a company overseas. They were fine parents, I think, but I didn’t really know them well. They were so busy with their work, they couldn’t really care for me... so the most vivid memory I have of them was after the bomb blew them into pieces... It was of their scattered remains.”

Her words were cold.

“That image is burned into my mind. After that, I was shuttled around from one foster parent to another, and I think that’s where my personality got screwed up. But that’s fine. I didn’t suffer over it. That’s just how things were. No use thinking about other people’s lives. Once you’re dead, everyone’s the same anyway...”

“...” Tosuke was still in a daze. Rei ignored it and continued.

“But here I am, aren’t I? Alive. That’s why I started making sweets. I finally remembered, just the other day. It was my fourth birthday, I think. We all baked a cake together, mom and dad and me. Can’t remember how it tasted at all, but we overbaked it and it ended up making this creepy sort of shape, and I burst out crying when I saw... It wasn’t even a big deal, but that’s why I started making sweets. And I think the reason I remembered is probably because of eating your ice cream.”

Rei nodded to herself.

“My pain’s so ambiguous, isn’t it?”

“...”

“If that’s true, I have to do something to make it concrete, in my own way. With my own flavors. So, I just can’t be with you anymore...”

Rei pursed her lips tight, as if her cold expression was holding something back.

“But why?” Tosuke spoke, at last. “This is your company,

Rei. You can do anything you want with it.”

“This is your kingdom, Kigawa Tosuke. Everyone else here is like an extra compared to you.”

“But Rei, you’re...!”

Tosuke tried to argue back, but Rei replied coldly.

“I’ve rambled on, but basically what’s happened is, I was head-hunted. By a brand-new cake company. I was never exclusively an ice-cream specialist, after all. I figured the offer came at the perfect time, since I’ve decided to go back to school, too,” she continued, as if pushing him aside.

“Then I’ll let you go there! You can still come here, can’t you?!” Tosuke spoke with desperation on his face. “There was never any rule about you always having to help me with every single thing! No, I can help you, so...so please... Please don’t say goodbye!”

“I can’t. You don’t know yourself. When I’m with you, all that ends up happening is...I start to forget the pain.”

Her words were strained, but direct.

“You’ve still got Furukita Sonoko working with you. I hate to admit it, but she does have some interesting taste buds. If the two of you work together, I’m sure you’ll be able to make all sorts of new flavors. You don’t need me anymore.”

“Sonoko’s not you! She’s...she’s not someone like you, who’s got the same-”

“It’s because we’re the same that I can’t stay here,” she interrupted, tapering off.

Tosuke was ready to protest again, until Rei walked up in front of him, swiftly reached out, and touched his cheek.

“You feel just like a normal person... You’re warm. I thought perhaps you’d be cold, like ice cream.”

Her words were gentle.

“If you ever thought that you weren’t human, I can tell you here and now that you’re wrong. Because if you’re not human, and the two of us are alike, then I’m sure as hell not one either...”

Her fingers slowly caressed his cheek. He clasped that hand tightly, but couldn’t find the words he was supposed to say.

“R-Rei...”

“I’m sorry, Tosuke.”

Gently, she pulled away her fingers and released herself from Tosuke’s grip, and for the briefest of moments their lips met. Then at once she pulled away and was gone.

That’s how the two of them parted.

For a while, Tosuke was a hopeless wreck, but half a month later he was already back on his feet and had resumed his work. Furukita Sonoko had reached such a level of stardom that she was rarely able to perform her monitor testing, and before Tosuke knew it, he was, more often than not, working all alone. Other than Kusunoki Rei, the rest of the staff were rarely talkative, further deepening his isolation.

And on the flip side, the media was knocking on his door more and more often. He’d built up quite the reputation, and so decided it was about time to stop worrying about everything and bring things out in the open.

“That’s right. We’ll be releasing a new product very soon,” Tosuke said grinning, fighting to promote his brand. In truth, he was coming to a loose end.

* * * * *

...Well, no surprises there, huh?

Tosuke was a man-to-man sort of guy at heart, always wanting to please those close to him. He only took up the task of serving the masses because Terasuki Kyouichirou had tempted him to, and because Kusunoki Rei had constantly been there at his side to support him with developing the products and advising him. Now that he’d lost the both of them, he didn’t know what to do next.

It’s a given in the industry that as soon as you release a good product, someone else starts copying you, and Tosuke’s ice cream, even though it was “insanely delicious,” began to lose its appeal. Sure, it was in a league of its own, all those ingredients fine-tuned to perfection, but as Kusunoki Rei had told him, “customers don’t

understand the intricacies,” do they?

Thanks to Tosuke’s products, consumers learned the joy of eating good ice cream. Can’t blame them for wanting to expand their horizons a little after that.

Tosuke had left the development of new products to other folk; *he*, on the other hand, only made the kind that was particularly interesting to him. And thanks to that, though it was barely noticeable, the steady pace had, bit by bit, begun to slow down.

Of course, Tosuke knew this better than anyone. When it came to ice cream, he had to know. He had to know that fundamentally, his own products really weren’t all that different from other makers’.

It was at this point that the folk monitoring Tosuke decided to enter the second phase of their plan. A fourth person would appear before Tosuke.

Actually, that’s not exactly right. He was no “person.” He was a genuine monster, as far removed from Teratsuki Kyouichirou as you could possibly imagine. And his name was Spooky Electric.

“Ice cream, eh? Weird little hobby you’ve got there.” Spooky E just had to laugh at the mission handed down to him from above.

His body was a curious shape. His swollen torso bulged out so much that it was almost round, but his limbs were long and thin like sticks. Normally, this synthetic human’s task was, in some respects, like Tosuke’s; though, Tosuke was unaware what he was doing. Put bluntly, he was mixing drugs into regular people’s food without their knowledge. Comparatively, the idea of that “change” occurring just because someone did or didn’t like ice cream was hard to believe.

Not that he needed to believe, of course. He was given this mission in order to test his loyalty. Whether the endeavour had any meaning or not was irrelevant.

“For now, Furukita Sonoko seems to be the most likely possibility. You should start with her,” said the man who’d come to issue Spooky E’s order, handing over some documents. He was also one of ‘them’ and was commonly referred to as Squeeze¹⁴.

“Yeah, yeah. Think I’m gonna take this one slow. Reckon I can make her into a terminal?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. We’ve had no official orders from Axis, but they may want her as a sample. You can interact with the target, but you’d best refrain from using your powers,” said Squeeze.

Spooky E nodded with a “gotcha”.

The rotund man had the unique ability to release electrical waves from his hands, which allowed him to manipulate the minds of people and “brainwash” them. By doing so, he could turn a great many people into “terminals” who would do his bidding.

“Still...you’ve landed yourself a fine job here, eh, Squeeze? An eradication-type and a combat-type together? That’s one hell of a good luck charm.”

Spooky E opened his eyes wide, chuckling to himself with a vulgar “hee hee hee”.

“A job’s a job,” stated Squeeze indifferently.

Spooky E just shrugged his shoulders with a sneer.

“Anyhow, I think even *I’m* gonna try to be careful this time. Don’t wanna get myself wrapped up in anything you guys are doing.”

Spooky E skimmed through the documents and then crumpled them into a ball. The paper then began to burn, lit by the shockwaves released from the palm of his hand, until it was gone without a trace. With a puff of air, the dust in his hand blew away, leaving nothing remaining. His hand was, of course, entirely unburnt.

“Furukita Sonoko, you said?” Spooky E’s whole face broke into a twisted grin.

“Tosuke-san, allow me to introduce you to Marco-san. I’ve brought him along because I think he will prove useful to your job.”

Furukita Sonoko, who’d come along for monitor testing like usual, had brought Spooky E along with her.

“Marco...san?” Tosuke’s eyes widened upon seeing Spooky E’s strange appearance.

“Marco D’Ambrosio¹⁵ is my name. It is a pleasure to be meeting you!”

Spooky E gave his alias, speaking with a foreign accent¹⁶ and clasping Tosuke’s hand with both of his, whirring it up and down. Tosuke wondered if this was his idea of a handshake.

“T-thank you. I’m Kigawa Tosuke. So, um...”

With a worried expression, he looked to Sonoko, who nodded and smiled back.

“Marco-san says he works in the trading business, so he’s very experienced with all kinds of flavors. I met him at the TV station the other day and just happened have some ice cream on me, so I let him have a taste...”

“I sprinkled my chips on it, a secret recipe. And do you know what happened? Sonoko’s ice cream became three times tastier than before!”

“Three times?” Tosuke was taken aback by the precision of the number, but he’d taken an interest in the secret flavor. “What are these chips you’re talking about?”

“Try some.” Spooky E opened the bag he’d brought with him and

took a bottle out. It was filled with fine granules of a dull purple color. “I call it ‘Spunky17.’”

“‘Spunky’, huh...” Tosuke took the bottle, noisily poured the granules into his hand, and gave them a sniff. “I see. It’s got quite an unusual smell.”

“It has a relaxing effect on people.”

Long story short, it was like a downer drug. But, being specially manufactured, it was undetectable upon examination. It was originally used to measure the extent of “change” in a person. Spooky E had been creating “terminals” to spread this drug across the city.

Tosuke tried tasting it with the tip of his tongue and sounded impressed.

“It’s got a minty flavor, huh. Kind of like peppermint.”

“That is your area of specialty for ice cream, no?” laughed Spooky E, making his already-large eyes bulge even more.

He appeared friendly, but his laugh hinted at untold depths.

“Yeah, I think it could be worth trying this out,” he said, his face lighting up the way it did whenever he had a good idea for ice cream.

“I’d love to be able to try out something that it could be used in too,” Sonoko added, smiling. She was, of course, completely unaware.

“I know! Marco-san, how would you like to try out my ice cream along with Sonoko today?”

“Are you sure?”

Whoa now, you want me to eat the stuff that’s part of the experiment?

On the inside, Spooky E was worried, but kept up a cheery facade.

A table was prepared for them, and they found themselves seated in front of the ice cream which Tosuke had so kindly arranged for them. Sonoko, as always, dug in without a second thought, but Spooky E had slight misgivings.

“This is...a little nerve-wracking for me...”

“No need to be nervous. Nothing here is going on sale; it’s all going to be thrown away afterwards anyway.”

“Did you go over budget again?” asked Sonoko, laughing. Tosuke responded with a mischievous smile of his own.

Spooky E sighed and hesitantly brought the ice cream to his lips.

And then...he expressed a reaction like all the other humans who had tried it before him: he was struck speechless, flapping his lips like a goldfish, and before he knew it, had carried another mouthful to his lips.

“Hahaha! What do you think? It’s a little different from what they sell in the shop, right?”

Spooky E remained silent, but he understood deep down.

So that’s it... I could just about designate this as a target... Except...

He found that there was something holding him back. Even though he’d been pinning his hopes on it, and even though he’s pinpointed it, there was really almost nothing that the Towa Organization would recognize as being potent. And once a decision was made, it couldn’t be overruled. If it came to that, the probational period would be over and “disposal” would commence.

I wonder which way this guy’s gonna end up?

“Delicious, right? But this is a monitor test, so you’re free to voice your opinions. Right, Tosuke-san?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

The two of them stared at Spooky E expectantly.

“Let me think...” In all honesty, Spooky E thought the ice cream was good, but he’d have preferred it to be sweeter. His tongue enjoyed junk food.

“I feel it may be too refined for my taste.”

“Hmm, I see. I guess it’s because you prefer chocolate by nature.”

Being told that, Spooky E was somehow startled.

“By nature? What’s that s’posed to mean?” he answered back, forgetting his cover accent.

“Hmm, how do I put this...”

“This guy can take one look at a person’s face and predict their preference,” Sonoko answered in his place.

“Predict their...preference?”

For some reason, it sounded incredibly disturbing. It felt as if Tosuke had peered into his mind and delivered some kind of fatal blow. Maybe it was similar to his brainwashing power, in a way. And, though he could manipulate people’s minds, he had no way of

knowing what they were really thinking.

You're telling me this guy knows?

“Predict? I can't predict. It's just... Ah, forget it. It's just a hunch I have.”

Tosuke didn't go on about the “pain” stuff, because he felt that was the reason why Rei had left. He'd decided never to tell anyone about that again.

“.....”

Spooky E was confused. He didn't feel the slightest hint of animosity towards this man, even though he normally always felt it when confronting pretty boys like him. He, with his overblown belly, grotesquely plump and disproportionate, and this guy, slim, tall, and handsome... It was strange, but he felt like they were deformed in a similar kind of way.

* * * * *

And so, this ‘Spunky’ substance, which had been passed from Spooky E to Tosuke at a low cost despite it being no less expensive than its competition, eventually mixed in with Tosuke's ice cream in the manufacturing plant and was distributed all across the chain. At the same time, Spooky E's terminals were observing how people's behaviors would change upon tasting it. Heh. It'd been a ton of work, but Spooky E had gotten the job done.

It was a great success, and it was around this time that Tosuke's classic mint ice cream turned into a hit product. Up until that point, it hadn't been selling poorly per se, but the sales figures for other flavors like chocolate, strawberry or vanilla had been better by a wide margin.

And there was a simple reason for this. Basically, the ones who'd tried it began to exhibit signs of addiction. Hihhi. It didn't have shit to do with Tosuke's ability. Fact is, the world's not that kind. Just think, the flavor he'd perfected after years of labor and diligent study lost so easily to drugs...

And who else bore the full brunt of the effect but the one who'd also been the object of the surveillance: Furukita Sonoko.

“Hold on now, Sonoko. Haven’t you been losing a little too much weight lately?” asked the manager while Sonoko was taking a break in the TV station’s dressing room.

“Huh?” she replied, looking up from her script. “You think so?”

“Think so?! How much do you weigh right now? I really hope you’re not on some kind of diet.”

“No, not particularly.”

“Are you eating properly? This job’s hard enough as it is. Come on, have this bento. The ones here are supposed to be tasty,” said the woman, trying to hand over a bento and chopsticks to Sonoko.

“I’m fine right now. We’ll be live soon anyway.”

“Which is why I’m saying you’ve gotta get some food in you.”

She insisted strongly. She really seemed to be worried about Sonoko, whose cheekbones were on the verge of standing out. Sonoko smiled, took the bento and slowly started eating.

Before long, the AD came and told them they’d soon be on air.

“Yes, sir!”

Sonoko put the chopsticks down. The manager wanted to say something, but Sonoko had gotten up before that.

“I’m just gonna go to the bathroom,” she said as she left.

The manager exhaled an audible sigh behind her, but she’d already broken into a half-run, and as soon as she’d entered the nearby stall, she bent over and tried to cling to the toilet bowl, retching, as she expelled everything she’d ingested earlier.

She hadn’t been able to eat anything but Tosuke’s ice cream lately. It was flavorless, and after she’d swallowed it, it felt like it was just lying there in her stomach, unable to be digested. She’d had similar symptoms, like the time she’d eaten the bad ice cream, but now that had extended beyond ice cream. To Sonoko, all food was becoming a foreign substance.

“Haa, haa, haa...”

Nevertheless, the reason for her popularity, her keen intuition that allowed her to perceive others’ feelings when communicating, shone

ever brighter, and almost everyone in the industry was growing to like her.

“Haa, haa... Get a grip... Gotta get a grip... Everyone’s waiting for me...”

She was behaving as if betraying their expectations would mean losing her reason for living. Fingers trembling, Sonoko flushed the toilet. At which point the manager showed up.

“Sonoko, are you all right?” she asked worriedly from outside the door. But Sonoko continued muttering for a while, unable to answer.

“Get a grip, gotta get a grip...”

“...It shouldn’t be long at this rate.”

Sonoko was at the studio, standing in front of the camera, smiling at everyone. Behind her, her manager was contacting someone by cell phone.

“What sort of tendency is she showing? Is it because of the drug?”

On the other side of the line, Spooky E’s voice could be heard.

“Most likely. It looks like she’s becoming unable to intake other foods. At the current rate, I’d say she’ll be dead in a month from malnutrition.”

The manager’s tone of voice was cold, as if she were a machine.

“Is it her body that’s in a bad state? Or are we talking mentally?”

Spooky E’s voice was equally unfeeling. It sounded as if they couldn’t care less whether Sonoko lived or died.

“I can’t say for sure, but I haven’t come across anything particularly indicative of physical change. Mentally, she has a noticeable tendency not to let others down, to an excessive degree. She did, however, behave like this to begin with, so there have been those who call her “slow”, “dull” and the like.

“...I see. Even before she ate the ice cream, huh?”

This phenomenon of becoming unable to eat other food wasn’t just something that exhibited itself in Sonoko. A large number of high school girls, working women and the like also exhibited similar symptoms around this time. But because they themselves happily replied that they’d been dieting too much and told others not to

worry, the general public didn't notice that the ice cream was the cause. They just attributed it to malnutrition instead. Well, no one noticed it at this stage anyway...

* * * * *

"A thank-you event?" Tosuke said unenthusiastically, scanning over the business proposal that Kageyama had shown him.

"That's right. Considering our competitors are starting to catch up to us, this could be our way to get people talking around here," said Kageyama confidently.

"But what would we do, exactly? If we're renting out a whole hall..."

The venue stated in the proposal was an event hall with a considerably large capacity of 20,000.

"We can start with a taste-testing festival. We'll offer samples to guests at no cost. We could also have other things, like presents of products with mascot characters on them, and giveaways decided by raffle. Oh, and I was thinking we could have Furukita-san present a talk show for us."

"Sonoko? I don't know if she'd come..."

"She'll come. She's been helping us as a monitor tester after all. I've even asked formally at her office. We got a hold of her schedule too."

"You've been really thorough, huh... Fine. It's pretty much decided then, isn't it? Why did you even bother asking me?"

"Because I'd like you to attend too."

"Eh?" Tosuke's face stiffened in response to Kageyama's words. "M-me?"

"You're popular, boss. If you make some speech in your usual clown getup, they're going to love it."

"G-give me a break! You want me to go out there in front of all those people?" Tosuke waved his hands broadly.

"You're really saying that *now*? You've been showing up in the media all the time, haven't you?"

"That's... I mean, I didn't have to meet so many people then..."

“Tens of thousands of people were watching, you know.”

“No, that’s not that I mean... You want me to stand up there in front of a huge number of people all at once, right?”

If he were to feel the pain of so many all in one go, then...

“It doesn’t even matter if you flub your lines. In fact, on the contrary, that could generate intimacy.”

Kageyama had no consideration for Tosuke’s unease. Though Tosuke tried to protest, he just laughed.

“Come now, there’s no need to overthink things. It would be enough even just serving the ice cream. Isn’t that what you’re always going out to do at the chain stores?” he said casually.

“Hmm...”

Tosuke didn’t tell him that he did that only because sometimes he couldn’t keep making ice cream without directly seeing the faces of those who were eating it. Even Tosuke could tell there wasn’t any hope of him understanding.

“Anyway, our products have some very hardcore fans. We have to give those people a little reward for always enjoying our ice cream. That’s what this event is about.”

“...Hmm.”

Doing it for the people who were enjoying his ice cream. Tosuke was weak to those kinds of words, because it was all that he had left.

Ten minutes later, Tosuke ended up signing the proposal.

* * * * *

From: CAP1755963W

To: OPF699

Application for Case M

In regard to the ongoing surveillance situation, we will proceed with disposal in accordance with your decision, prior to beginning stage 002.

Scope of erasure includes unit at the center of surveillance, Notorious I.C.E.[18](#), extending to related units (approx. 20,000 affected), or else all related zones in their entirety. Objective is to cease vital activity of all targets.

Aiming to carry out with extreme prejudice the elimination of individual 'Furukita Sonoko,' observed to have greatest influence out of all targets. Notorious I.C.E. deemed not as high in priority, but still a target of disposal, in accordance with XE23. Over.

* * * * *

From: OPF699

To: CAP1755963W

Verdict regarding application for Case M

Permission for application granted. Over.

* * * * *

...It was the beginning of the end. Kigawa Tosuke's glory had begun to tumble towards its final moments.

“Oh, hey Kazuko, wanna go get some ice cream?”

A pair of high school girls walking down a main city street stopped in front of Tosuke’s ice cream shop.

“Really? When it’s this cold?”

“This place is almost always bustling. Come on, I’ll treat you!”

“Fine then. But Touka, isn’t the reason you like this place because of your boyfriend? You should really be eating it with him.”

“Eh, seems fine to me. We sit next to each other at the same prep school. Isn’t that close enough?”

“Honestly...”

One of the high school girls, Suema Kazuko, seemed exasperated, but she wasn’t entirely against her friend’s cheerful insistence, so she joined her, and they both lined up for ice cream, peering over the counter.

“I’ll have that one with the kiwi sauce, then.”

Suema had quickly decided, but the other girl, Miyashita Touka, was scrutinizing the flavors intently, struggling to choose.

“Hmm, lemme see...”

“Come on, hurry up. We’ll be late for class.”

“Mmmm... Then I’ll go for the chocolate mint! That’s always a classic!”

“‘Classic’. You’re only saying that cause it’s the first one you ate with your boyfriend, aren’t you?”

“Hey, don’t sweat the details,” said Touka, chuckling embarrassedly.

Their ice cream was served. Money and ice cream crossed hands, and the two of them began to eat as they walked down the road.

“It does taste good, huh!” said Suema with admiration. Mmm-mm, she nodded as if to savor the deliciousness, and turned to Touka.

“Doesn’t it?!”

At this moment, Touka was, for some reason, staring at the ice cream.

“...This is strange,” she whispered.

“What’s wrong?”

“It doesn’t taste the same... What does this mean?”

Her tone was very unlike that of a girl; it was like a man’s voice. Suema frowned in puzzlement, but Touka continued to murmur.

“For what reason could it have changed? ...Something must have happened.”

Still affixed to her green ice cream with black sprinkles, Touka, as if someone other than her had taken her place, cautiously took another bite of the ice cream as if to confirm.

* * * * *

The weather that morning couldn't really decide what it was. One could say it was sunny, another could say it was cloudy, and neither would have been wrong.

The opening of the venue was scheduled for 2 p.m., but visitors had already gathered a little after 12. There were a lot of girls and couples, but a decent number of older men were mixed in too. It was proof of how far-reaching the ice cream’s popularity was. Though the free admission was effective, it caused the turnout to be much higher than expected.

The schedule was moved forward and the large gates to the hall were opened at 12:30. The visitors entered, abuzz with chatter and excitement.

Ghosts, Frankensteins, Draculas, witches... The staff were cosplaying all sorts of slightly spooky mascot characters as they distributed the ice cream. Everyone headed to their personal favorites and began eating them contentedly.

Twenty minutes after opening, the venue had already reached full capacity. One might even be convinced that virtually everyone who’d been frequenting Tosuke’s ice cream establishments was present.

“Looks like we’ve got quite a turnout...”

The clamor had even made it through to the waiting room. Tosuke let out a great sigh. He had complex feelings about all this. He was feeling reluctant about going out there in front of everyone, but it was

truly gratifying to think about how much everyone loved his ice cream. The two thoughts intermingled, and his chest was filled with an indescribable feeling.

Nobody but Tosuke was present in his private cabin.

“.....”

Still, Tosuke thought about the people who should have been there with him in that room, if things had been how they used to be. But Kusunoki Rei was now the general product development manager for a cake company, and Teratsuki Kyouichirou was no longer in this world.

Not only that, but there had been an incident in February involving faulty construction with one of the buildings he'd posthumously built, in which the first people who entered had ended up trapped inside for several hours. It caused such an uproar that even the police had had to be dispatched. Because of all this, Teratsuki had turned into a laughing stock. Affiliate companies had also suffered from the repercussions and were closing across the board. His achievements in life had gone up in smoke, and now went ignored by the general public.

Tosuke's company had been completely removed from Teratsuki's, so it was unaffected by the commotion, but Tosuke didn't know how to feel about that at all. Was he supposed to feel sad? Angry? Or coldly ignore it all? ...He couldn't settle his feelings into one concrete emotion.

“Kyouichirou, how far am I supposed to go...?” he murmured to himself.

“Oh, I don't think you'll be going anywhere.” It was the voice of a man.

He turned to find a man with strange bodily proportions, morbidly obese, but with long and slender limbs.

“Marco-san?” Tosuke looked surprised. “I didn't notice you there. When did you come in?”

“Does it matter when? You're so off guard, I could've snuck in any time you weren't looking,” said Spooky E mockingly, a harsh grunt escaping his throat. Globes of chocolate ice cream were plastered

around his mouth.

“Hm?” Tosuke narrowed his eyes. Something was off. The Marco he knew didn’t speak in such fluent Japanese.

“It’s all over for you now. I just figured I’d drop by to say hi,” said Spooky E, licking off the mess around his mouth with his slobbering tongue.

“...!” Tosuke’s face stiffened. “It’s...over, is it?”

“Sure is.”

“I see... I knew it. I guessed it would be something like this,” he said dejectedly, shoulders slumping.

“Huh?” Spooky E frowned. “What, you knew this was going to happen?” asked the freakish man, surprised.

“I didn’t *know*. Not *how* it was going to happen... But I knew things would turn out like this eventually. It always turns out like this.” He sighed deeply. “Always...”

His manner was that of an old man, weary with years, rather than his usual childish self.

“Every time, without fail, the people I trusted, depended upon... They all left me. Norisuke, Kyouichiro, Rei, everyone... They all leave at some point or other. And now it’s your turn. I have to wonder... Just where did I go wrong?”

Listening to Tosuke whimpering with his head slumped down, Spooky E’s already large eyes grew even larger, until at last he burst into raucous laughter.

“...Bwhuhuhahahahahaha! What, you mean...you were actually relying on me and my brilliance, were you?”

Tosuke was bewildered by the sudden provocation.

“Huh?”

“You really are a lost cause, aren’t ya? A fool to the end. Keh!” he growled spitefully, and glared at Tosuke with upturned eyes. “Idiot! The folks you relied on who up and left were all just using you at their own convenience. They were taking advantage of the fact you had no future, and they milked you for all you were worth. That’s all it was. ‘Left’, you said? Keh. All that was going through their minds was ‘No point using this guy anymore,’ so they threw ya away like a discarded

toy!”

He burst into another roar of laughter, and then his expression changed abruptly into something sullen.

“.....” Tosuke was taken aback. “...What do you mean I have ‘no future’?”

“What d’you think I mean? It means you’re finished. ...Actually, it means you never had a future to begin with.” Spooky E snorted through his nose mockingly. But his face remained sour, like he’d bitten into a bitter bug as he ate his ice cream. “Same as me...”

At this moment, Spooky E scratched at the side of his head covered by his long hair. Tosuke was shocked. Blood oozed out, not least because one of his ears had been cut clean off.

“Your ear...!”

“An enemy got the better of me. Goddamn, I screwed up big time.” Spooky E’s face contorted into an expression of such rage that you could almost hear it creaking.

“An enemy...?”

Spooky E ignored Tosuke’s question and went on.

“That *shinigami* bastard. I’ll find him, I swear...! ...But right now, Mr. Ice Cream? This is about you,” he said, glaring at Tosuke.

“About...me?”

“You’ve been declared as a fraud who tricked Axis. It’s been decided. And now you’re going to be ‘disposed of’,” spat Spooky E, who’d finished his ice cream and was now crunching on the cone.

“W-what are you talking about? Who’s Axis?”

“You’re better off not knowing. Wouldn’t understand even if I told you. In any case, you probably thought you got this far on your own merit, but it’s all been pre-established. You’ve just been moving along the rails set out for you. Keh. ...But you’re all outta track now. It’s all gone.” Spooky E gave a heavy sigh as he looked at Tosuke with upturned eyes. “*They’re* already on the move. They’re gonna kill you, and everyone who was ever involved with you. And there’s no hope of escape.”

“.....”

Tosuke said nothing, simply opening and closing his mouth like a

fish.

“If anyone finds out I told you this stuff, I’m gonna be in deep water too. Well, practically no chance of that happening. Doubt you’ll even have time to say anything to ‘them’... Heh, then what’s a legend like me doing, telling you all this stuff, eh?”

Here Spooky E’s smile looked faintly self-derisive. Unlike his previous bellowing, it was incredibly weak and powerless.

“.....” Tosuke was briefly stunned, but soon came to his senses. “Kill...? What do you mean kill?!”

“It means exactly what it means. You, everyone here at this event, and Furukita Sonoko too. Especially her, I’m guessing.”

“What?!” cried Tosuke. “W-when will this happen?!” he asked, reaching out to clutch at Spooky E. At that point Spooky E grabbed his arm, and he was blown away by the electrical shockwave released from the monster’s palm.

“Guh...?!” Even as Tosuke was rolling across the floor away from him, he heard the brute’s voice.

“You were a failure from the start, and the others have turned into failures. Hmph, you really are pathetic. For folks like us, there’s nowhere to go. Get it?”

By the time Tosuke got up and raised his head, Spooky E was nowhere to be seen.

“Hi there, everyone! I’m Furukita Sonoko!”

When Sonoko took to the specially prepared stage and greeted her audience with the mic, the guests, each eating their ice cream of preference, turned toward her and raised a cheer.

“Thanks for coming today! As it happens, I really love the ice cream here. Don’t you love it too?” said Sonoko, as if she were the presenter of a children’s toy show, and even the older adults replied with an honest “Yeah!”

“I think a lot of you already know this, but I’ve been doing monitor testing for the ice cream here, and out of the ice cream you’re eating here now, there’s one in particular that I once said I wanted everyone else to taste too, because it was just that good. If you enjoy

it for me, I'd be ecstatic!"

Sonoko's words prompted an incredible reaction, the eventgoers bobbing their heads, shouting things like "That's right!" and "It's delicious!". And it didn't feel like they'd been swept up in the hype either—they really understood what she was saying. It was a rare sight to see at such a large-scale event.

Even the staff, who were made to wear all manner of strange monster costumes, wore smiles that weren't just for show.

There were several TV stations at the venue too, and they were capturing everything on camera. Their staff, too, were all grinning for some reason or other. You might even be tempted to say that there wasn't a single soul in a bad mood at this place.

Except for one person... A combat-type synthetic human who'd snuck his way into this event: Squeeze.

"....."

On the outside, Squeeze looked just like your average human. He wore a staff armband and was dressed in a plain suit and necktie. If anyone there were to look at him, they could never have imagined that he'd been brought into existence for the purpose of slaughter. But the reason he was here now was to fulfill that exact purpose, and it was what he lived for: to erase without a trace the experiment that the Towa Organization had used Tosuke to instigate. By now, roughly 70 percent of Tosuke's ice cream fans—in other words, those deemed to have demonstrated a good reaction—should have been present. There was no way he'd miss out on such a fine opportunity.

Massacre.

That was the mission which Squeeze had been assigned this time. If he perchance happened to fail, then another synthetic human, an eradication-type with a power far more terrifying than anyone else's, who was monitoring the whole situation, would surely wipe him out, as well as everyone else, in one fell swoop. These people were encircled in a double-layered trap.

"...Furukita Sonoko," whispered Squeeze, as he watched the girl on stage, smiling radiantly, with a dark gaze. "I've got nothing against you or Kigawa Tosuke personally...but this is my mission. Don't hate

me for this.”

He shifted into a stance that would conceal his presence.

There was a loud slam in a corner of the venue. A pile of materials had collapsed.

Having noticed this, the attendees glanced curiously, and Squeeze turned to look towards it. There was Kigawa Tosuke running toward the stage, pale as a ghost, paying no regard to how he looked. Everyone was familiar with Tosuke and his jester appearance, so they began to murmur. “Huh? What’s going on?”

And while all eyes were on him, he screamed,

“...Th-this is terrible! At this rate, we’re all going to die!”

Wha- Damnit! How does he know?! All of Squeeze’s cold composure was blown away.

Tosuke was running toward the stage at full pelt, barging through people and yelling at everyone to run. He was heading towards Furukita Sonoko. Squeeze was now certain that Tosuke knew he was ordered to take down Sonoko.





T-this is bad! I have to hurry!

He set to work on his ability, “Plug”. It had a flaw: a slight time delay was needed before he could launch his attack.

“K-Kigawa-san?” Sonoko looked puzzled. Tosuke reached her with a sprint that far outperformed that of any human.

“Sonoko, run! It’s dangerous he – “

...But it was too late. Just as Tosuke reached out a hand to Sonoko, Squeeze had launched his first attack toward her.

It was an invisible shockwave. The surrounding people wouldn't have been able to notice that he had even fired. All that might have hit their ears was a high-pitched screech, but it was, in fact, a murder weapon with destructive power capable of rending flesh and cutting bone to pieces...

There was no way Tosuke could have known. Not even Spooky E had told him of this. But somehow, he was able to perceive its approach, for that is the only explanation for the action he took next.

He launched himself straight into Furukita Sonoko. It happened just as the attack launched. Sonoko was sent flying, leaving Tosuke himself directly in the line of fire. His body was ripped to pieces and whirled through the air.

“!!” Squeeze had realized his error.

From Tosuke's body spurted sprays of blood, diffusing into the air. Thrown onto the stage, he collapsed. And beneath, pooled liquid from the failed experiment with the pale green skin. Its color was...

“...Huh?”

Everyone was dumbfounded, and then astonished. Then someone cried,

“His blood... it's blue!”

For a moment, total silence descended. But that soon turned into a commotion.

“W-what the hell is he...?”

“H-He's not human!”

“M-M-Monster...!”

Everyone had seen it. And they all realized that for a moment, this place they were in had become a different world, one that wasn't an extension of their daily lives. And in realizing this, they lost their ability to make rational decisions.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” rose a scream.

With that as their signal, everyone hurled away the ice cream that they'd been holding and made a mad dash for the exit.

Which brings the story of Kigawa Tosuke to a close.

Heh heh heh.

Under normal circumstances, I, the great Captain Walker, would merely have been playing the role of bystander. I'd had no intention of ever intervening directly. But since that numbskull Squeeze fucked up, it meant I was forced to show off my real ability. Eh, what can you do?

That's right. I'd been monitoring this guy this whole time. Right from the very start, since he showed himself to the world and began making his ice cream. I'd been watching and waiting for the right moment to "level the playing field". Well, I rarely had the opportunity to show off my abilities, so if we're being honest, I was looking forward to something like this happening. Hihihih.

My power is "eradication". In simple terms, the way it works is like a "gasoline engine." I spread a type of gas in a given place, then I "ignite" it, and everyone goes *kaboom*. It's fundamentally the same as kickstarting an engine by feeding fuel gas into a combustion chamber and igniting it with a spark plug.

And this gas, it comes out of my body, see. Well, to ordinary people it'd be something like "sweat", but this stuff doesn't have to be in a sealed location 'cause I can adjust the concentration and the spread to a degree. I could spread it over kilometers and kill tens of thousands of people—and that's exactly what I was trying to do here.

When I say ignite, I don't actually make it explode. There's just this component that tears up living organisms, and the gas I spread beforehand triggers a chemical reaction that happens in a snap. That's right. It's like if everyone got their skin covered in sulfuric acid, and wearing clothes didn't mean shit... In fact, picture that but tens of times more destructive. Hehe, yeah, you remember just how explosive the speed that kind of chemical reaction is? Betcha it'd be giving Ice Nine a run for its fucking money!

You'd be turned to sludge like that. Human, bear, tiger, synthetic human. It doesn't matter. I don't know if Tosuke is still alive out there,

but it doesn't matter. Everything'll turn to soup soon. That is, except for a certain mighty Captain Walker. The "sweat" that breaks down the gas comes from my body, so I'm completely fine. All living things around me meet their death, while I stand there without a scratch. Now is that a godly power or what, eh?

The preparations have already been set.

The idiots crammed in the event hall are rushing toward the exit, where I am. But it's too late for you guys. 'Cause no one can save you now.

* * * * *

"Haha..."

Standing in front of the exit was, on the outside, a perfectly ordinary man. He was dressed in a suit, his features were serious, and he wore a staff armband. On his chest was a name tag, so that attendees knew how to address him.

It read "Kageyama".

He had been by Tosuke and the others' side the whole time, and he had always been monitoring the situation. And now, he was about to reveal his true colors.

"Kageyama-san! W-what should we do?!"

A member of staff wearing cosplay clung to him. But Kageyama looked down at them with a cold stare.

"The fuck you asking me for? Drop dead," he declared bluntly.

That was the first time in the whole course of events that he had showed his true face. And then...

"I see... So the one at the entrance was indeed the eradication-type. The overseer of this case, 'The Tender'..."

...said the one in cosplay quietly.

Huh? ...Kageyama looked at them, and he noticed that something was strange. The cosplayer wore a black hat and black cloak. It

seemed to look like a mascot character from their company, but he'd never seen this particular one before.

Their white face could have been man's or a woman's—it was hard to tell which. It was, almost as if a *shinigami*...

"You're..." He attempted to inquire, but it was too late for that.

— Crrick.

For an instant, there echoed the sound of a neckbone snapping, then immediately came the wave of attendees rushing to get out as everything was swept away in a maelstrom of chaos.

There was an air of something splintered faintly hanging over the area. The air of an aftermath of violently discharged bullets; of silence, yet of a faintly lingering reverberation; of a constant ringing that echoed in one's ears.

“.....”

A look of disbelief painted Squeeze's face as he looked down on Kageyama's...on Captain Walker's corpse. The two of them were supposed to have massacred everyone.

There were no external wounds. Only his neck was bent at a strange angle. His spinal cord and medulla had been twisted apart in an instant and he'd died on the spot. Had he gotten in a fight with the escaping crowd...?

“This is impossible...”

But what other explanation could there have been? There was almost nobody left in the event hall, and the few who remaining were looking around anxiously, unable to calm down. The people from the TV station who'd been relaying live hadn't run away on account of their position, so the cameras were still rolling, but they were so stunned that they didn't have any target to focus on.

“Nn, nnggh...”

Furukita Sonoko, who'd been pushed away by Tosuke and knocked out cold, came to her senses after a few minutes. But her head was hazy, and after taking in her surroundings, she tilted her head in puzzlement.

“...What?”

She couldn't at all remember what she was doing here. All she could do was look around in confusion, without knowing what the pool of blue liquid spreading out beside her was. She recalled nothing.

And there was no one else nearby.

No one collapsed on the ground, no corpses, nothing. There were faint traces of scuff marks in the puddle of liquid, but any hint of tracks like footprints had already been erased, to the point that even knowing where they led was unfathomable.

* * * * *

...So in the end, though there was initially a great uproar about it being some kind of extra-terrestrial invasion or a mutant conspiracy, it was publicly announced that some equipment on the stage had malfunctioned, causing an explosion which had spilled out a whole lot of blueberry sauce that had been stacked there. There was nothing abnormal about it. The wild claims of people who'd been eating the ice cream's blood starting to turn blue immediately began to turn into baseless rumors and eventually dwindled into nothing. The image of the ice cream company in question had worsened to such a degree that it was temporarily dissolved, and its constituents were absorbed by others in the profession.

* * * * *

No one tried looking especially deeply into what became of Kigawa Tosuke. His existence had vanished into thin air.



ACT.2
the seeker



seek [sēk]

This verb has a few meanings in English, including:

1) to make a search or inquiry 2) to go in search of; to look for 3) to make an attempt; TRY —used with to and an infinitive 4) to resort to; go to

The phrase “has yet to seek” has a similar meaning to the phrase “not yet there” or “lacking.”

seeker [sēkər] is the agent noun, meaning “one who searches or seeks.”

Sales Employee:

Yeah, he always had this idea in his head that he had to do everything by himself. He couldn't rely on anyone else.

—In what way, exactly?

Sales Employee:

I'll give you an example. When you're producing ice cream and you want to start distributing it as a product, there's all sorts of hoops you have to jump through. Like, how much milk solid and butterfat you use determines whether you can legally call it "ice cream" or if you have to call it a "frozen dairy dessert". As a matter of fact, if you look at our products in that sense, about half of them are actually only classified as sherbet. So we couldn't actually trademark those using the word "ice cream."

Sales Employee:

—Can you explain what that means?

Uh, yeah, it means, like, there's so much flavoring or fruit mixed in that the dairy content is low. We really threw in a ton of other things, like egg yolk. Though the milk we used for the base was of insanely high quality.

Sales Employee:

—Okay, I get it. So, what then?

Yeah, well, this is all because the higher-ups like the "Ministerial Ordinance on Milk and Milk products" have a ton of regulations. Honestly, with the costs we were incurring, it would've been more lucrative for us if we'd just made it into ice cream. But that CEO was never too concerned with those things. Like, he almost never partnered up with other companies in the profession. Sometimes it felt like he was trying to pick a fight with everyone on the outside. 'It tastes good this way, so what's the problem?' That's one thing he used to say. He was always arguing with the vice president

Sales Employee:

on that point.
—So, they didn't get along?
Huh? Nuh-uh, you've got it backwards. They got along crazy well. That's why they could argue so openly. You know, we were convinced those two were actually gonna get married at some point. So it was kind of a shock to us when we heard that she suddenly left. —They say it was because she felt she couldn't keep up with him. Do you believe that?

Sales Employee:

Hmm, I dunno... There's a lot we'll never know. But it didn't seem like she was working under him. Rather, it felt like they were doing the same kinds of things together. You know, it's still hard to swallow, even now.
—This CEO sounds like a really outrageous character.

Sales Employee:

Hmm... I guess he must've had a lot going on. Like some weird hobbies that he couldn't talk about in public or something. Can't really say for certain, though.

Sales Employee:

—You think he had something to hide? I mean, he always insisted that the taste-testing stuff was done in secrecy, so in the end, we never knew a damn thing about his personal life or anything like that. ...But I kind of think that's maybe for the best, you know? Say what you want about him, but, the ice cream, that was delicious. That was his everything; it really was.

* * * * *

“What are you, dumb? Lame excuse for a pick-up line.” That was the girl's parting shot as she turned her back and walked away. I'd called out to her, but she was unwilling to hear me out.

“Oh boy...”

Eh, it was nothing new. My “report” was so rough around the

edges that sometimes it was hard to get people to understand what I was going on about.

I pulled myself together and looked around the area.

It was still ten in the morning, but there were plenty of people on the street outside the station. Not hard to believe, since it was right in the middle of Golden Week. Normally, I'm not the kind to interview people enjoying their vacation, but I didn't have many other options. For this particular job, holidays were the only free time I had to work on my reporting. Normally, I'm only allowed to do the work my company tells me to do, so if a report doesn't get its proposal approved, I'd need to deal with it at my own expense.

"Oh..." I spotted another girl who looked like she'd listen to my story, and closed in on her.

She looked about high school age, and she was sitting alone on a bench spacing out and looking up at the sky. At her feet was a Spalding sports bag, which seemed to hold her luggage.

"Hi there. I was wondering if you could spare me a moment to ask you a few questions," I asked, but she didn't respond. She simply kept gazing at the sky.

"....."

"E-Err, excuse me. I'm a reporter, you see. Working for a journal?"

"....." Absolutely no response. Naturally, I was a little irritated by this.

"Listen, you could at least give me some kind of answer, couldn't you?"

I went round and walked up in front of her. And then...

"Waah?!" she exclaimed suddenly, leaned backwards. "W-what is it?"

"Seriously?" I was bemused.

She clasped her chest and stared at me.

"Jeez, you almost gave me a heart attack. Just springing out like that..." she said, her voice trembling slightly. She apparently hadn't heard me at all.

"I...I called out to you several times!" Seeing her this shaken had made me a little nervous as well.

“Uh, did you want to talk to me?” She was a fairly cute girl with large eyes.

“Yeah, as I said before, I was wondering if you’d allow me an interview,” I said agitatedly, taking out a business card and handing it to her. She timidly accepted and stared fixedly at it.

“...Nonomura...Haruto-san? You’re a journalist?”

“That’s right. There’s a subject I’m pursuing right now, and I was hoping you could tell me about it.” I broached the topic, as it didn’t seem like she was going to run away. “Do you have any interest in phantoms or anything like that?”

“Phantoms?”

“That’s right. It might be better to call them urban legends though. What’s your opinion on them?”

“I don’t dislike them... but, why are you asking me about this?”

“Well, I was hoping to turn the answers I get from people into an article.”

“And you’re not a photographer?” she asked, looking at the single lens reflex hanging around my neck.

“Oh, I do take pictures, but, believe me, I’d never take yours without your consent or anything like that.”

My owning a camera seemed to invite two extremes: “Don’t you dare take any photos!” or “Can you take pictures of me?”. both of which were trouble. But this girl said neither of those things.

“So, you’re going to write up an article on phantoms?” she asked, simply staring with an odd look on her face.

“Right. I thought, hey, might be interesting.”

“Is it, though?”

“You don’t agree?”

“No, it’s just, I was thinking that it’s kind of rare for guys to be into that kind of thing.”

“So, for instance, have you heard any rumors of phantoms popping up around here? Anything like that?” As I asked this, the girl began to giggle for some reason.

“What kind of story’s that?”

“Huh? What kind? It’s, uh, well...”

“You’re not talking about Boogiepop, are you?”

I’d never heard the name before. I gave her a blank look.

“Boogiepop’s a scary one. After all, they’re a *shinigami*.”

She giggled even more.

“Okay, so what is this Boogie...whatever you call it?”

I inquired, but the girl just feigned ignorance and wouldn’t answer.

“Hmm, whatever shall I do... Should I tell you? Or shouldn’t I...?”

“Come on, don’t put on airs like that. What’s wrong with telling me? I’ll even treat you to something, so, please?” I answered hurriedly.

The girl then looked at me with a mischievous expression and said,

“Alright then, ice cream.”

Those words and the look she gave me startled me. How do I explain it? It was as if, even though she was just a girl, she seemed to be testing me, like she concealed some hidden depths. And ice cream... That had been one of my “objectives,” or maybe it was my goal all along.

Despite this, I somehow managed to hide my surprise and continued.

“...Ah, sure. That’s fine. You can pick whatever you want. Err, may I ask your name?”

“Miyashita. Miyashita Touka.”

“Miyashita-san, huh? You’re in high school?”

“Yeah. And I’ve got to attend a prep school on top of that...” She fluttered the tips of her fingers and looked up at the sky like a bird trying to fly away. “It’s true that we have to study, though. Such a pain, maaan...” She smiled wryly, behaving as if it were someone else’s problem.

After that, we entered a local cake shop. She ordered immediately, and I asked for a coffee.

“You like ice cream, do you?” When I asked this, she looked a little sad and nodded.

“I kind of do, yeah. At least, I did up until recently.”

“Bad memories?”

“...Eh, doesn't matter now.” She seemed a little annoyed, so I changed the subject.

“Speaking of ice cream, there was all that uproar going on until just recently, wasn't there? With that chain store getting really big and then folding.”

“Ahh, that place! It's a real pity, right? ...That was like the only place I ever went to for ice cream. I was so upset when I found out it was gone. The mock test that day was hell, too...” She let out a deep sigh.

“Everyone's so dumb, going on about aliens and stuff. Wasn't all that stuff about the green blood was just some food coloring or something in the end?”

“Apparently so, but the real killing blow was that the CEO went missing. If he'd just resurfaced and clarified things, they'd have regained their trust just like that.”

“He went missing?”

“Yeah. He vanished after the incident.”

“But why?”

“Nobody knows. According to insiders, he was a craftsman with the temperament of a prodigy, so they speculate that he experienced such a shock from the accident that he ran away.”

“Huh. You sure know your stuff.”

“Well, I am a journalist. I've done my research.” Even though it was all on my own initiative and I hadn't received permission for the report from the chief editor or the copy editor.

“Speaking of ghosts, that place was all about creepy stuff, huh.”

“Yeah, that's what I was wanting to ask you about. It's been pretty popular among you kids, right? What did you think of its slightly spooky mood?”

“What did I think? Uhh... I mean, it was popular because it was tasty, right? I actually think the logo and that stuff had kind of an adverse effect.”

“Now, that can't be. They've released a whole line of fancy goods, haven't they?”

“You mean you think it’s a good design? ...Ahh, not a good topic for me.”

“Hm?” Finding her reaction strange, I insisted on more details.

It turned out that this Miyashita Touka’s boyfriend was, in fact, a designer of some sort, and he’d praised the shop’s design aesthetic. However...

“So what didn’t you like about it? Are you in a fight with him right now or something?”

“No, not that. It’s just...” As she trailed off the end of her sentence, our orders of ice cream and coffee arrived. She began to lift the spoon in her mouth in an attempt to worm her way out of the question. And then her eyes widened.

“Isn’t this...the same ice cream as before?”

“Huh?” I was taken off-guard, but quickly realized. “Right.”

I explained to her that the personnel from that company had had to branch out. There was sure to have been someone among them working at the shop we were in.

“Still, it’s like it’s identical. How do I explain it? It feels like it’s got the same root. I wonder if it really is actually the same person that made it.”

“You sure know your stuff. But-”

As I expressed my admiration, she butted in.

“That’s right. I’ve got a good sense of taste. One time, a restaurant even complimented me on that,” she said, laughing mischievously. It was cute to see her bragging the way she said.

“Is that somewhere you went with your boyfriend?” I asked, and she nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. I gathered from this that she had not grown to hate her boyfriend at all.

“Okay, so let’s assume that the place sold good ice cream. Problem is, places like that don’t just become popular through flavor alone. If it’s got a bad style, it’s not going to take off. You may not have liked it personally, but others must have at least found it ‘good’. You know why?”

“Huh? I don’t really get what you’re asking.” She looked vacantly.

“Let me put it like this. Have you ever had an experience where

you've seen something that's creepy, scary, or some other negative image, and yet it drew you in somehow? I wonder if that's the secret behind the ice cream's popularity."

"Ahh, I get it... So the whole story's connected by phantoms, huh?" She nodded, and I along with her.

"That's right. So, you get it now? Makes sense if you look at it in the sense of 'it's scary, but I want to give it a try', right?"

"Yeah, I guess, now that you put it that way. I bet Suema would know a lot more about that kind of stuff than me, though."

"Who now?"

"She's a friend of mine. She's really knowledgeable about these things. She's like, crazy smart." Again, she started to boast a little.

"Well, let's put your friend aside for now. What did you think of that CEO character? Did you find him a little scary?"

"Yeah, I did. The clown guy, right? I think he looks pretty handsome without his make-up, though."

"That's true. But he dressed that way on purpose. In that sense, I suppose he's sort of like a... modern day urban legend, wouldn't you say?"

"He totally is, yeah. ...Let me guess, is that what you're investigating?"

"That's a part of it, yeah." I raised my coffee to my mouth and took a sip.

"Huh," she remarked with some meaningful significance, and then fell silent for a while, looking at the ice cream she was holding.

"Alright then, you mentioned this 'Boogiepop' character earlier. What's that all about?"

She ignored my question and instead asked me one.

"Are you going to keep on investigating the head of that company?"

"Hm? Well...yeah. At least, when I can find the time."

"In that case, would you mind if I tagged along with you?"

"What?"

I stared open-mouthed as she leaned forward.

"I'm kind of interested in that clown guy myself. If you're gonna

go off and investigate him somewhere, could you bring me along with you?”

Her request was deadly serious.

Trial Manufacture Staff:

—That being the case, it must mean that he ended up using quite a few of your ideas.

That's correct; except, not once was I ever awarded recognition for it. Everything related to product development was presented as if the boss had done it, after all. When something of yours got used, there were no bonuses, no shares... They didn't have anything like that there.

Trial Manufacture Staff:

—You're saying that they were stingy when it came to incentives?

To be perfectly honest, yes. Our base salary was about average, but there was very little set in stone regarding pay raises and such. Though, I suppose this was just after company was about to go under. (wry smile)

Trial Manufacture Staff:

—Was the share of company profits poorly distributed among its employees? The returns were... Well, personally, I didn't know much about it. But, to tell you the truth, I think they were lacking. We outsourced the manufacturing to Suzukuni Confectionery, and that cost us a considerable amount of money. The costs were just too damn high. Getting all the different ingredients lined up for test-manufacturing alone was an extravagance.

Trial Manufacture Staff:

—And the working environment? Oh, we were lucky in that regard. There were zero restrictions on the funds we expended, to the point where sometimes I had to wonder if it was really okay to be spending so much. But whatever we ended up using, the boss always had to perform his check at the end.

—So that would mean all product development was ultimately handled by

Trial Manufacture Staff:

the president?

That's right. Kind of unusual, isn't it? When I say check, he didn't just give it a taste—he had to remake the whole thing from scratch. In that sense, we weren't much of a development team... You know, it was almost like being a photo model. It was clear that I was the one in the photos, but the work still belonged to the photographer who took it, you get it? It felt like we were just supporting actors for his inspiration.

—Haha, ouch. So really, whatever the process, it wasn't much of a creative job, then.

Trial Manufacture Staff:

I mean, what we were doing was experimental. But, you're right. I don't think there was much in the way of creative achievement.

—Would you say that that was the reason for the vice president's resignation?

Trial Manufacture Staff:

It might have been, yeah. But she and the boss were effectively doing the same kind of work. They were evenly matched in terms of talent, after all. I expect she'd seen a number of products through from start to finish. It was just that her name was never publicly announced. Of course, they never actually made it clear who made what at that place.

—So the president was the kind of person who always had to have things his own way?

Trial Manufacture Staff:

Hmm, I don't know about that... It's true that the world thought he was the one who made everything thanks to how he marketed himself as a kind of mascot. But really, it was the kind of place where 'anything goes as long as it tastes good.' It was such a strange place to work at.

* * * * *

I stopped the interview tape there.

“What do you think?”

“...” Miyashita Touka was frowning.

We’d moved from the earlier cake shop to a booth in a coffee shop. Its lack of customers made it a good location for interviews, but I was the one doing the explaining at the moment.

“So, these people were working with him?”

“That’s right. Though they’re all doing different jobs now.”

“I can’t really tell if they’re praising or mocking him.”

“I know what you mean. He must have been a hard one to gauge.”

“Hmm...” she considered.

“So, why exactly are you so interested in him?”

“Well, I’m not especially interested in him as a person, exactly...” She was being vague. “But like, this guy was really, really invested in his work, right? At least, from what I’ve heard.”

“True, it’s what everyone’s been saying.”

“I’ve been thinking... How do you get to be so dedicated? Is it really that much fun making ice cream?”

“It sounds like he was a real artisan. I doubt it was easy for ordinary people to understand him.”

“Ordinary, huh? ...That’s it, that’s the problem. I’m so ordinary, it’s almost sad,” She sighed, “Sometimes it’s easy to lose confidence.”

“Confidence in what?” I asked, but she wouldn’t answer. Then she raised her head.

“Hey, are you going to keep investigating after this?” she said, changing tack.

“Ah, well... Actually, I’m not covering him in any official capacity,” I admitted. I explained that it was all a personal endeavor, and that I’d only been acting independently. “...so, I don’t have anything planned, per se. Though I have been thinking of checking out where he used to live.”

“You know the address?”

“Yeah.”

“I wanna go! Come on, let’s go there!” she said, eyes lighting up.

“Alright, but... do you have enough time for that? You’re studying for entrance exams, aren’t you?” When I asked this, she let out a

particularly vocal sigh.

“Well, I actually took a one-hour train ride just to get here. You wanna know why?”

“Hmm, I guess you must live in this area? Or, uh, you went shopping for a change of pace?”

“Nope. Mock test,” she whispered. This surprised me.

“S-So then, it must have started a while ago, right? Is it okay for you to be out here like this?”

“Nope. It’s not okay,” she said offhandedly. “I’m skipping it. If my parents find out, they’re gonna flip out at me again. Maaan...” she said casually.

Now I understood why she’d been so strangely absentminded when we first met. Her mind had been elsewhere, filled with guilt and impatience. My calling out to her wouldn’t have reached her ears.

“Which is why I don’t have anything to do today. I’ve pretty much got the whole day to myself.”

She spoke with renewed vigor, letting out an embarrassed laugh. Oddly enough, it didn’t sound like a show of courage, but something simpler and more refreshing.

Miyashita Touka, eh?

To be honest, after looking at her and listening to her story, I almost felt like the report didn’t matter very much.

“So, where’s the house?”

“Uhh, it could be a ways out. It’s still within the city, though.”

After leaving the coffee shop, we began to consider how we’d reach our destination: Kigawa Tosuke’s former home.

“I wonder if we can catch a taxi...”

I scanned the area looking for a taxi rank, at which point she started yanking on the hem of my coat.

“Hey, Nonomura-san, look!”

My eyes followed her finger, but I couldn’t see anything of interest.

“What is it?”

“That woman.”

As I looked more carefully in the direction she was pointing, I saw that there was indeed a woman standing there, waiting for the traffic lights to change, but found nothing remarkable about her.

“What about her?”

“Isn’t that Kitasono?”

Being told this, I squinted hard to confirm. It was true—it was the celebrity Furukita Sonoko. “Kitasono” was her nickname.

“Now that you mention it. She looks so different from when she’s on TV, I hadn’t noticed.”

“Has she even been on TV lately?”

“Oh yeah, come to think, I haven’t seen her on recently. Maybe she’s lost popularity.”

“Actually, hasn’t it been since the ‘green blood incident’? Maybe she just hasn’t been working since then.”

“Perhaps, since we’ve heard nothing about it.”

“I wonder what she’s doing now?” Miyashita was looking incredibly inquisitive.

“Shall we tail her?” She was surprised at the suggestion.

“...Is that okay?” she asked, looking hesitant.

“She’s connected to Kigawa Tosuke too. We could always formally ask her for an interview, if you’d prefer that,” I said, grinning.

She hemmed and hawed for a bit, then nodded. “That’s true.”

And so, we began following behind Furukita Sonoko.

* * * * *

Head of Facilities:

Sonoko-chan? Yeah, she came over a lot.
—What sort of relations did she have with the president?

Head of Facilities:

Relations? Now, hang on. I mean, sure, the two of them were stuck in a room together for hours at a time, but I don’t think what you’re implying ever happened.

Head of Facilities:

—Well then, what business was she there for? Was it really just as a monitor? I’m not sure she was *just* a monitor, considering she only ever had to taste products that we never planned on

selling. It was one of the president's amusements. I don't think Sonoko-chan herself was very relevant.

—So, he got her to taste high quality products?

Head of Facilities:

Right. Some of them cost 100,000 yen a piece. For stuff like that, you need to be a real connoisseur to really appreciate the flavor. I think the president must've wanted someone who'd understand him. —You believe Furukita-san had a good sense of taste, then?

Head of Facilities:

Well, I couldn't really tell you about that, given that I'd never actually seen her eating anything. But I recall her saying that she didn't like sweet things.

—Now that's odd. What would she be doing as an ice cream tester if she didn't like sweet things?

Head of Facilities:

Well, this is going to sound a little strange, and you'd know this if you worked with the president, but the two got along so well, it was almost uncanny. —I see. So that's why everyone accepted her?

Head of Facilities:

Ah, except for the vice president. She openly disliked her. She thought that she wasn't suited to monitor testing because she was too biased. But I suspect that it was more of a personal jealousy.

—I heard there were rumors of her and the president getting married.

Head of Facilities:

Yeah, we were all saying that. But I doubt that Sonoko-chan was the reason they split apart.

—What about Furukita-san herself? Did it look like she was enjoying the testing?

Head of Facilities:

Hmm... I might be saying too much here, but she got incredibly cute for a time, and I think the president's ice cream had something to do with it. People are more appealing when they're delighted by something, right?

—You're saying this was because the ice

Head of Facilities:

cream was so delicious?

I think so, yeah. I mean, I might be thinking this because there's a certain kind of faith surrounding "taste," always tinkering with the machines I do. But here's the thing, did you know that, in prison, they say that the prisoners forced to eat terrible food all the time start to get this dark look in their eyes, cause nothing but trouble, and serve longer sentences? The older ones apparently burst out crying when they get something they don't like. On the other hand, the ones without much of a preference look peaceful. Not that I want to lump Sonoko-chan together with prisoners, but you get the idea.

—You think that the ice cream changed her personality?

Head of Facilities:

I got the impression that she mellowed out. And I mean really mellowed.

—In which case, I wonder what'll happen now that she's stopped eating it.

Head of Facilities:

Ah, good question. I think... No, I'm not really sure. But sometimes she'd have these moments where she seemed really lonely.

—Lonely?

Head of Facilities:

You know, like when you miss your mother's cooking? That was the kind of feeling I got from her, I'm sure of it.

—Perhaps she'll revert to her bad personality.

Head of Facilities:

You're not very nice, are you? But I couldn't tell you about that. Nobody has a clue about what'll happen to her now..

* * * * *

We'd been on Furukita Sonoko's trail.

She hadn't disguised herself or been hiding her face, yet not one of the commuters around her seemed to notice that she'd been a regular on TV. I wondered if it was because of her completely unassuming aura, and the fact that she just looked like your everyday average girl.

I struggled to remember exactly what she'd been like before, but I just couldn't recall. Had she always been this way? I'd seen her on TV multiple times up until the last few months...

Hmm...

After about five minutes of walking, she entered a certain building.

"...What?"

"Isn't this...?"

Miyashita and I looked at the building. We were dumbstruck. It was an obstetrics clinic.

"I, uh, I wonder why she's going in there."

"N-Normally, it means, uh... It's where babies are..." Miyashita's face was turning a shade of bright red as she spoke.

"...Is she pregnant?" I'd been prepared for a lot of things in my line of work, but this took me off guard. As I recalled, she was unmarried, and only 19 years of age—not even an officially recognized adult yet.

As we stood there, side by side, passers-by began to give us strange looks. We panicked and hurried into the nearest convenience store. Pretending to browse magazines, we kept watch on the clinic's entrance.

"...Hey, you don't think it was with the president, do you?" she whispered to me in a hushed voice.

"It's possible... But then, what would that mean?"

I was confused again. There were idle rumors that Kigawa Tosuke was, in fact, an alien with green blood, or some kind of mutant. If those rumors were true, then what would that make the child in her belly?

General Affairs Staff:

—Out of all the things that he did, did any of them stand out to you as especially baffling?

Not really, considering pretty much everything he did made no damn sense. (Laugh) You could say everything he did was unusual.

General Affairs Staff:

—There was nothing that particularly stood out to you?

Hmm, let me think. Well, for starters, there was his white face paint. Or, more of a pale green, I guess.

General Affairs Staff:

—Did he choose that color himself?

Well, that guy did everything by himself. Always hiding away in his little room. He didn't have anyone doing his make-up or anything, and he never let anyone see when he was putting it on. This wasn't a thing he did just for advertising or when he was out in public. It was pretty regular.

General Affairs Staff:

— Even in his own time?

I don't know about his private life, but he'd often go about his business at work that way. He didn't show up to meetings a whole lot, but when he had to, it was always with the paint.

General Affairs Staff:

—That must have been a surreal spectacle.

It sure was. He had it on so often, it made you think that maybe that was his actual face and the skin color was just his make-up!

General Affairs Staff:

—If that were really the case, it would substantiate the rumors of him being an alien.

(Wry smile) Well, those are plain nonsense, but I think one of the things that gave the public that impression was that he almost never met with anyone.

—So, it was a rare occurrence to get the

General Affairs Staff:

chance to speak to him?
Right. He was basically always holed up in the testing room. That guy was a machine when it came to his job. You know what his make-up reminded me of? That weird patterned “war paint” they always put on in those Indian movies. Maybe he put it on his face as a means to motivate himself.

—But he did it a lot when he was meeting people too, didn’t he? You’d think that it would be fine without make-up.

General Affairs Staff:

Hmm. No, whenever he was meeting someone, he’d always be on guard in some way. You must have noticed that yourself, no?

—You have a point there. (Laugh)

* * * * *

Surely not.

As we stood outside the obstetrics clinic, I gulped hard. Even I couldn’t help but have a few base thoughts.

“If the president really is her partner, would he know about her being... About this?” Touka looked a little angry.

“I wonder... Considering he ran away, maybe not.”

“That’s so irresponsible!” She was in a huff. It was a natural response, but it felt like I was being reprimanded as well. I was worried that I might do the same, were I in his position.

About thirty minutes later, Furukita Sonoko came out, and we resumed our covert pursuit.

She entered a coffee shop and quietly began sipping on some tea. We sat down at a table in a fast food joint laid out like a cafeteria and watched as we ate our burgers. She then took some kind of book out of her handbag and began to read. She was intending to stay for a while, it seemed.

“Think she’s waiting for someone?” said Miyashita, holding a fry between her fingers.

“Unlikely. She hasn’t been looking at her watch at all.”

Peering through the viewfinder of my telescopic camera, I noticed that she seemed to be engrossed in her book. I quickly averted my gaze, before commuters would start getting suspicious.

“This is boring.”

“Stake-outs usually are.”

“Do you do this a lot, Nonomura-san?”

“Well, for work, this wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Huh. Did one of those times happen to involve your report on phantoms?” she asked, and I had to laugh.

“Not in the slightest! That’s my personal project,” I explained to Miyashita, who was looking incredulous. “So, here’s the deal—right now, I’m officially an in-house journalist, but that doesn’t stop me from taking on freelance jobs. That investigation is one of those.”

“And it’s about phantoms?”

“Well, more precisely, it’s supposed to be ‘an analysis of urban structures and interpersonal malformity in modern folklore’. It’s interesting. The things people say from one generation to another may be different, but you can always draw some parallels between them.”

Miyashita simply blinked at me for a moment, but eventually continued.

“So, you’re pretty much going around listening to people’s ghost stories? What about your company work?” she asked.

“I’m doing that too, naturally. Today’s my day off.”

“...You used your day off to do the same thing you do at work?” There was a tone of disbelief in her voice. “Weird.”

“I guess that’s about the only thing I’m good at.” I smiled wryly.

“Is that like, your dream?” she asked, this time with a strangely serious look in her eyes.

And then...

...Guess you can’t hang on to your dreams forever.

It was as if someone had whispered right next to my ear. For some reason, the voice sounded much like my own.

“Nah. Well, it’s nothing as grandiose as that.”

“.....” Miyashita stared at me with upturned eyes, and finally sighed. “You’re just like him. You’re lucky, to have such a clear goal.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” said Miyashita, turning away.

“Who’s ‘him’? Let me guess—your boyfriend.” I inquired jokingly, but she replied with a gloomy “Pretty much.”

“Sometimes I kind of feel a little pathetic, talking to him.” She sounded vacant.

“But you are dating, right?” I was finding it difficult to understand what she found disagreeable.

“That’s exactly my point. I figured you probably wouldn’t understand.” Miyashita sighed deeply once more.

“.....” I didn’t know what else to say. Then, I realized that I still hadn’t asked her about any of the things I’d been planning to ask her. It seemed I’d gotten caught up in her pace.

“So, why phantoms?” And again, she dropped in another question. It was getting hard to tell just which one of us was involved in the media.

“Huh? What do you mean, why? Where did this come from?”

“Well, like, what did you call it again? Modern folklore? That’s sort of twisted? If that’s what you’re researching, it doesn’t all have to be about old-fashioned stuff like ghosts, does it? There must be plenty of other stuff.”

“Actually, that’s where you’re wrong. There happen to be an awful lot of fresh new ghost stories at the forefront of civilization. There are many gaps in our awareness as we progress, and there’s a sense that something lurks within them.”

“Is that how it is?”

“In a way, the fact that we’re still progressing means that we aren’t fully developed. And, in that sense, there’s not much that distinguishes our age from primitive times. Our feelings of deep-rooted anxiety are, in their rawest form—”

“...Yeah, I don’t get it.” Miyashita shook her head.

And, in my ear, I thought I heard the words, *She says she doesn’t get it. I doubt there’s anything you could say now that’s going to make her listen...* A vague unease began to well up within me. But then, as if to cut that feeling short...

“So basically, you’re searching for something, and these phantoms are kind of a clue to help you find whatever that is, right?” she asserted with a strange finality. I was a little taken aback.

“Searching, huh? ...Heh. When you put it like that, you’re probably right.”

“I wonder what it is you’re searching for?” she whispered.

The question wasn’t meant for me. She was thinking to herself and had only voiced her thoughts aloud. That she kept talking without waiting for my reply was proof of that.

“Maybe it was the same for Kigawa Tosuke. He kept on making so much ice cream, but what did he hope to achieve with that? Maybe he thought he’d eventually come to an answer. Or maybe he wasn’t aware of anything, consciously...”

“.....”

I went silent, finding myself unable to follow up. At that moment, Furukita Sonoko in the coffee shop began to move.

“Ah, she got up!”

“Think she’s going home? Or heading somewhere else?”

We resumed our pursuit.

* * * * *

Head of Shipping:

How we decided on our products?
Practically all of them were chosen based on cost estimates and balance of flavor.
—So there weren’t any instances when you sold something simply because it seemed like it would sell well?

Head of Shipping:

Well, you say that, but virtually all of our products sold well, so... (Laugh)
Frankly speaking, I couldn’t have told you which one was best, if we’re basing it solely on taste.

Head of Shipping:

—About how many trial products were there, per round of screening?
Hmm. I’d say around ten, at least. More, when we had a lot on the go.
—And only one product got selected out of those?

Head of Shipping:

Well, yeah, when you have as much

variation as we did. There were similar kinds of flavors, but each was subtly different. And those changes could drastically alter the impression you got. —Does that perhaps mean that there was no concrete idea of what the product would be in the creation process?

Head of Shipping:

Not sure. No one really knew what was going on in the boss's mind. He'd say things out of the blue like "We might be better off changing this one just a little," and we'd do that, but then he'd go off and change the whole thing again. Things like that happened a lot.

—I get the impression he was pretty rough with his approach. Like, he was just trying whatever came to him.

Head of Shipping:

That's exactly what it felt like. When all the test products were lined up there in a row for screening, it felt like we were being made to measure a bottomless swamp.

—How often did the president's opinion factor into which product was chosen?

Head of Shipping:

It didn't happen very often. We had a lot of cases where we'd say something like, "I'd pick this one, but could we change these ingredients?" but the boss wouldn't listen. He'd say that if we changed it, there'd be no point in it even having the flavor it did. He was very unapproachable in those cases, and he would never ever change his mind. A lot of products ended up being dropped because of that.

—Do you think there was some sort of ideal flavor the president had a clear vision of?

Head of Shipping:

> Hmm. I couldn't say... But my gut feeling says no, there wasn't.

—And yet he was still able to bring about such masterful flavors?

Head of Shipping:

On the contrary, I think it was because he didn't have a clear vision that he was

able to produce so many great things. I think essentially, he had a love of ice cream that surpassed all others', and he always held things up to that standard. That's how he was able to try out this and that and end up with such a variety. —He said some peculiar things, didn't he? Something about feeling people's pain.

Head of Shipping:

Yeah, and in the end, I think he was the one feeling the most pain. I think that was what made him such a master of his craft. He was producing all these things for us, but perhaps the reason he kept on making ice cream was to try and fill in the parts of himself he was missing. Gee, he really did get worked up over that stuff.

* * * * *

It seemed Furukita Sonoko was on her way back home. She was headed for the city center, lined with rows upon rows of skyscrapers. Although the area was packed with people, very few of them actually lived there.

"Where could she be going?" inquired Miyashita, "She's on her own. I'd get it if she was going out on a date or something."

"I wonder..."

It was indeed unusual to see a girl going to the commercial district alone. There were restaurants there, sure, but she'd just been drinking tea in a cafe. It was very unlikely she'd be going to a restaurant after that.

"And if she does happen to be pregnant, it's even stranger. She shouldn't be travelling out and about so much without a good reason."

She moved at a constant pace. It was clear that she had some destination in mind. I wondered if she had an appointment with someone.

...Suppose that someone was the missing Kigawa Tosuke?

As I grew anxious and further observed Furukita Sonoko, Miyashita's eyes began to dart about her surroundings.

“Hey... You know what, I think I might have seen this place before. They showed it on TV. Yeah, it was somewhere around here,” she whispered nervously.

“I don’t see anything weird about the area.” I was determined not to lose sight of Furukita Sonoko.

“That’s not what I mean... It was on a news program. And the reason why they were showing it...” Her voice was trembling. “Don’t you remember? It was the vocalist of some rock band. And this was place that he...”

Then it struck me, and I took in my surroundings.

She was right.

Back then, this skyscraper was the place where a young artist at the peak of his popularity committed suicide by jumping off a roof: The Grand Centrale. It had become a famous spot, and for a while, there was a constant stream of high school girls who’d been stopped on the roof carrying their wills.

“D-don’t tell me...”

I felt a terrible chill as I looked at Furukita Sonoko’s back. While we’d been standing still, the distance between us had been growing.

“We’ve got to go after her!” Miyashita tugged on my sleeve, and I snapped to my senses.

“R-Right!”

We continued our pursuit, now with an altogether different tension.

Our prediction was correct. Furukita Sonoko, with no hesitation in her step, had walked through the front entrance of the Grand Centrale.

...I was naturally at a loss as to what to do.

It was too perfect to be coincidence.

The celebrity fallen from grace, supposedly fathering the child of a man of dubious origin, the presently missing Kigawa Tosuke, on her way back from the hospital, coming alone to a famous suicide spot...?

“We’ve gotta follow her, there’s no other way!” Miyashita dragged me along and we set foot in the towering building.

There were two tourist elevators specially provided for the various tenants within, a direct line to the viewing platform on the 62nd floor. Furukita Sonoko had, without any hesitation, taken one of them. We were too late to catch it, so our only option to wait impatiently as the other elevator descended.

“How slow can this stupid thing be...?!”

“Yeah—” As I said this, I realized that I may just have happened upon a scoop of unbelievable proportion.

Well so be it. If she wants to jump, let her jump. Then you can capture that so-called “irrefutable evidence” for yourself...

“.....”

...but then I cast a sidelong glance at Miyashita beside me.

She was gritting her teeth, staring at the elevator display—one pointing up, the other down—looking ready to burst into tears at any moment. She was gripping her Spalding bag so tightly in both hands, they quivered slightly.

“...Looks like I have higher priorities right now,” I muttered to myself under my breath so that she wouldn’t hear.

“Hm? What did you say?”

She looked up, but I shook my head and told her it was nothing. *Some first-rate reporter you are*, I thought.

The elevator arrived, and we rushed inside frantically. It took only about a minute to reach the top, but to us, it felt like hours. The moment we arrived, Miyashita dashed out onto the floor with no regard for the other visitors, with me following quickly behind.

“...Ahh, she’s not here!” she cried out, scanning the area.

“Excuse me!” I started asking the people closest to us whether they’d seen a girl with so and so features.

“Oh yeah, there was a girl like that. She went that way,” one kind person explained. They pointed to the emergency exit, which led to the stairwell that ran the height of the building.

“Thank you!” I answered, and Miyashita and I flew down the route.

Normally, there shouldn’t have been anyone on those stairs, but now there were footsteps coming from above.

We tried calling out at the top of our lungs, but the owner of those footsteps had just opened another door and left the staircase. Even as we ran, we continued to yell, but there was no response—it seemed she hadn't heard us. Under ordinary circumstances the door would have been locked, but for some reason it was now ajar. We went through and were met by a strong wind—where else but the open roof and its open sky.

“Shit. Why wasn't the door—” I began to say, but something stopped me in my tracks. “...Oh.”

It was too late. Miyashita behind slammed into me with a thud.

“What gives?!” she shouted, visibly annoyed.

And then, the person on the roof turned toward us. We were so very late. I realized that we could no longer run away.

“Uh, uhm...” stammered Furukita Sonoko, looking our way.

The problem was, she wasn't alone. And the other problem? This other person occupied the same space as her. In other words, the two of them...were locked in embrace.

“Wait...”

Miyashita's eyes went wide as she assessed the two of them, who had evidently been kissing.

“W-who the hell are you two?” The man clinging to Furukita Sonoko was similarly surprised. “Huh? Nonomura-senpai, is that you?” he exclaimed in a goofy voice.

He'd been my kouhai in a media studies circle during my student years: Freelance photographer, Mamiya Kazuo. This was extremely bad.

“Ahh...sorry. We had no intention of peeping.”

There was nothing more I could do but bow my head and grin like an idiot.

“Suicide? Me?” After we'd explained, Sonoko burst out laughing. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“Uhm, well, that's because... Uh, Nonomura-san?” Miyashita was floundering.

“Ah well, err... It looks like this was all a huge misunderstanding.

We clearly read far too much into it,” I said, smoothing things over as best I could. “It seemed like a logical assumption to make, though. Why else would you come to such a place?”

“It’s because I’ve been here taking pictures here all day. Sonoko just came to bring me a little something to pep me up,” said Kazuo, grinning.

Kazuo was still working on his “Transforming City” photography series, something he’d begun back in his student days. Like the view from here, he had always longed for the kind of photography that had you looking down upon the world from above, and only recently had he received permission from the building’s superintendent.

“I had a lot of trouble trying to get them to let me do this, what with all the people jumping off and killing themselves. I was starting to become neurotic!”

Neurotic. Doesn’t that just sum this up, I thought to myself.

“But wow, you two were dating? I had no idea,” I exclaimed.

“Yeah, sorry. It’s just that after she started getting so famous, it got kind of difficult to tell people around me... Not that it matters now. I just sort of missed the right window to say something.”

“Why doesn’t it matter now?”

“Oh, I retired from being a celebrity,” said Sonoko cheerfully, “so it doesn’t really matter if anyone finds out now.”

“Huh, is that so? ... That would explain why you haven’t been on TV. But why?”

“That’s...” Sonoko’s face went red, and she began to fidget.

“You know, though, you’re absolutely right, senpai. She shouldn’t have been coming to a place like this. She needs to be taking more care of her body,” he said with a silly smile.

Miyashita and I exchanged glances.

“So then, the child she’s pregnant with...”

“Yeah. It’s ours,” said Kazuo proudly.

“Yup. So I thought, hey, maybe it’s time to quit the celebrity life,” Sonoko said with a nod.

“Hoo, boy...” Miyashita and I suddenly felt a sudden wave of exhaustion, and our shoulders slumped.

It appeared the two of them already had their name in the family register. They were married, but they hadn't had a ceremony yet so only their close relatives knew right now.

"...That would make you Mamiya Sonoko-san, then? So you're going to be a mother soon..." Idle remarks were all I could muster. "You're quite young, too. Not that that's anything unusual."

"That's amazing," said Miyashita, with an obtuse sort of praise. "I kind of respect that."

"It's nothing special, really." Sonoko blushed. She looked genuinely happy. I was starting to feel like a total fool for presuming such sordid business.

"But you know what, senpai, I'm glad." Suddenly, Kazuo put a hand on my shoulder.

"About what?"

"Well, you seem to be doing just great. Looks like you've worked up the spirit for 'phantoms' again, eh?"

"Huh?"

"Don't you remember, senpai? Back when you were applying for jobs, you said something like 'It's just not worth pursuing my own goals anymore'. Honestly, it really hurt when you said that. But it looks like you didn't lose that passion. I've changed my opinion of you," he said, nodding up and down.

"Oh really?" Miyashita peered at my face.

"Ah, er... That's..."

My head was starting to spin. Thinking back on it, it was true. When I was a student, every proposal I'd taken to the publishing agency had been curtly rejected time after time, and it had drained all the motivation from me.

...Huh? So, when exactly did I decide to pursue my own goals?

It felt that it must have begun...after I interviewed Kigawa Tosuke.

* * * * *

Furukita—rather, *Mamiya* Sonoko—was only too happy to help with my report.

"Kigawa-san? No, I don't think he was an especially strange person

at all.”

“You did taste testing for the ice cream, right? How did you come to end up there?”

“Umm... How did I again? Oh yeah, I remember! I was reporting on the company for my work, and that was when they invited me.”

“So they were relying on your taste expertise, were they?”

She laughed at my question. “Come on, now! I didn’t have any talent as an appraiser at all!”

“What then?”

“It was because I made connections with someone from the office. We sort of formed a tie-up. All I ever really did was treat myself to ice cream.”

“Oh, really? That’s not what others have told me...”

“If I’m being particularly frank, that’s because both sides were viewing it as a promotion. The truth is, I don’t really like sweet things myself,” she said with a carefree smile. I’d had the feeling that she was a little closer to the center of things, so this came as a surprise.

“So you were never engaged in any especially meaningful conversations with Mr. Kigawa?”

“I’m afraid not. But that didn’t mean I was on bad terms with him or anything. It was strictly business.”

“Business, eh... So, your relationship with the company must have been pretty dry then.”

“Yeah.” Sonoko nodded with a gentle, calming smile. I could already feel a sort of motherlike dignity that lay behind it.

“Huh, I see. I suppose you aren’t really all that familiar with Mr. Kigawa then...”

I had been hoping to learn more about him, but if she didn’t know anything, then I was at a loose end. Then Miyashita, sitting beside me, posed a question to Kazuo, who had also joined us.

“Were you dating Sonoko-san back then too, Mamiya-san?”

“Yep, sure was.”

“Did you hear anything to this effect at the time?”

“Oh, absolutely. She used to get so excited about it! Always going on about so insanely delicious it was.”

“What? Oh, come on. I never said anything like that!” Kazuo was amused at Sonoko’s anger.

“What are you talking about? It was just about the only thing you’d talk about back then.”

“It was not! Why are you making things up? He’s making this up,” she said towards me emphatically.

“I swear it’s true. It actually got to the point where I felt a little jealous. Any time I brought up something like ‘You and that young company boss get along pretty well, huh,’ she’d get in a huff and be like, ‘Give me a break, he’s got his own partner!’” said Kazuo, seemingly entertained. Sonoko, on the other hand, was pursing her lips ever tighter.

“I said nothing of the sort! This is getting ridiculous.” She pouted in a childlike manner unbefitting of her age. This tickled me, and I couldn’t help but laugh a little too.

“So, Sonoko-san?” inquired Miyashita.

“What?”

“You don’t remember, then? What the ice cream tasted like?” Her tone was strangely serious, or sober, and her way of speaking, oddly masculine.

“Why?”

“Well, she claims she was a big fan of that ice cream. That’s why she’s taken such an interest,” I said, following through, but Miyashita ignored me and continued to question Sonoko.

“Are you saying that you have no recollection of what the flavor was, or how you felt when you tasted it?”

“.....”

Sonoko was momentarily lost for words, but despite that could still form an answer.

“...Umm, let me see.”

Miyashita continued to stare unbroken at Sonoko, who was slightly shaken, and spoke on.

“In which case, it would mean that the events surrounding the ice cream and Kigawa Tosuke—even so far as the details of his artistic capabilities—have been all but completely emptied from your mind?”

Miyashita followed that with a nod and an “I see”. “Because no particular change had been observed, you no longer became a target... Is that how we’re to take this?”

“What are you talking about?” Sonoko looked perplexed.

In the next instant, Miyashita was grinning.

“I was just thinking how lucky you’ve got it. I’m taking entrance exams, so I don’t have time to reminisce about the past and stuff,” she said spiritedly. “I think I’m kind of jealous, actually. Sorry if I said something weird.”

“No, no, it’s quite alright.” Sonoko smiled back.

This complex exchange between the two women was utterly unintelligible to Kazuo and me. At best, all we could do was glance at each other and shrug.

Former managing director²⁰:

So, tell me, just what do you hope to achieve by interviewing Kigawa Tosuke? —Well, I been thinking about compiling all my findings into a journal or essay, eventually.

Former managing director:

Quite the flight of fancy. People may have made a big fuss about him at the time, but you're a little late. You can try all you want; I doubt you'll discover much now.

Former managing director:

—Oh no, I don't intend to write Mr. Kigawa's biography. That would be just one facet of it.

Former managing director:

...Ahh, I know you. You're the guy who's researching phantoms, aren't you? Aha. Well, good luck with that.

Former managing director:

—Well, thank you.

Former managing director:

Have you managed to get enough interviews?

Former managing director:

—Oh, I'm getting there.

Think you have enough material to start putting it all together, then?

—Maybe. If you'd like, I could show it to you sometime.

No, that's quite alright. In fact... I don't really think I'll be able to see it anyway.

—What? No, not at all, I-

It's pitiful, you know. You are, and I am too. But the most pitiful one of all was Kigawa Tosuke himself. Or, considering who he was, he just might have been luckiest one of us all. He was truly happy when he was making his ice cream, he had Rei-chan, the greatest partner could have hoped for, and she understood him. But even so...if given the choice, I don't think I would ever have swapped places with him. Not even at the height of his glory...

—...?

Miyashita and I had finally made it to our original goal, the place where Kigawa Tosuke once lived. We'd taken a cab, but the driver made sure to tell us in his gruff voice that there was nothing around there. When we arrived, we realized what he'd meant by that.

The buildings were all abandoned. The ones that weren't scheduled for demolition had placards in front of them, fruitlessly asking to inquire with so-and-so real estate agency. The majority were likely failed properties with no hope of being sold, seized from their former owners by the tax office, banks, moneylenders... Rows upon rows of empty, tenantless buildings.

"It's a real-life ghost town." We examined our surroundings, slightly dazed. The distant cawing of crows added to the eeriness, even though it was smack dab in the city center...

"Okay, if he lives here, he really needs to change his name to 'Spook,' or 'Spooky,' or something," Miyashita said in awe. I'd also been thinking something along those lines. "Makes me wonder if this place still gets electricity and all that stuff."

The multitenant building that was Kigawa Tosuke's former residence had half of its windows smashed in.

"I was hoping to ask for permission, but there doesn't seem to be anyone around at all, let alone a caretaker..."

"Come on. No one's gonna care if we come in here. The place doesn't even have a fence."

"Very true. Let's go inside, then." We proceeded into an interior carpeted in dust; it seemed like no one had been in there for months. As we feared, nothing was working. The elevator was long dead, so we were forced to take the stairs.

"This is going to be a hike..."

The staircase was long. I looked to Miyashita. I was used to running around with a heavy camera, so it wasn't much of a physical burden on me, but I feared that she might not have the same amount of stamina. However, despite her large sports bag, she was bounding nimbly up the stairs. I wondered if she practiced some kind of sport.

"You play tennis or basketball or something?"

“Nah. I’m not doing anything like that. I did do some track-and-field in middle school though,” she breathed out an exhausted sigh. “It’s been a long time though, so I’m kinda pooped,” She said, grinning. It seemed she wasn’t ready to give in just yet. I smiled back, and the two of us looked at each other and burst into laughter.

When we’d finally reached our goal, the 7th floor, we gave ourselves, for no real reason, a big thumbs up.

“Well, that was an achievement!”

“You can say that again.”

This floor had a grimy look to it, but, to our surprise, there were a number of cardboard boxes still full, labelled with things like “Chocolate Chip” and “Vanilla Essence”. The unused goods had been stored away, still preserved.

“What’s with all this? They just left it here?”

“Looks like it... Did no one think to come back here and clean up after Tosuke went missing...?”

If someone had, these boxes would have been disposed of by now. As I took a look around, Miyashita went up to the entrance and reached for the door.

“...Eeek!” Her cry shocked me in turn, and I ran over to see what the fuss was about.

“What’s wrong?!”

“T-The lock..”

I looked down, and in her hands was the doorknob. It had come clean off the lock, down to the base of the mechanism. The bar meant for the lock had been twisted and was still attached to it.

“It...it just came off...” She hurled the knob away as if it were something harmful.

“Was it broken...?”

I put my hand to the door and gave it a push. Since the lock had been destroyed, it slowly opened inward, as expected. We went inside.

It was a modest place for the CEO of a company. For one, the kitchen occupied almost the entire area, with little room left over for living space. The place where he must have slept was a cheap, pipe bed. A mattress and blanket lay upon it, but they were both the sort of

thing you might find in a trash heap.

There was nothing of particular interest. Some suspected he might have some special hobbies, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

Fridges were lined up one after another. I tried opening one and was immediately assaulted by an odd, sickly-sweet smell.

"...Yeugh." I winced on reflex, as the ice cream inside had melted and had turned a strange shade. It hadn't yet spoiled on account of it being sealed, but it was nothing you'd dare attempt to eat. It was as if a mad scientist had met an untimely death and left a mountain of lab apparatus and chemicals.

"No, not *as if*... That really is the case here, isn't it?" I closed the fridge door, with no desire to examine any of the others. They likely contained all sorts of miraculous flavors that Kigawa Tosuke had toiled to create, brimming with appeal, it was like a mound of summer grass... "the place where noble soldiers one time dreamed a dream... 21" I sighed.

The next moment, I realized that Miyashita was nowhere to be seen.

I panicked. "Heeey!" I called, but was met with silence. "What's wrong?! Did something happen?!"

I ran around the floor looking for Miyashita, but there was no sign of her.

How could this have happened? What should I do?

A creeping dread grew within me. Bowls and steel plates that I'd kicked away with my feet clanged violently.

"Where are you?! Can you hear me?!" My voice rose to a scream.

And then, from somewhere not so far away, I heard a feeble, lonely, and yet strangely cheerful melody. It was the sound of someone whistling.

"...What are you so worried about?" came a hushed voice from behind.

I spun around. There, from behind the partitioning screen that separated the kitchen from the living space, a shadow stretched into view. It was a person.

Relief flooded through me.

“So that’s where you’ve been...” I said, starting to advance. My foot stepped on something. Looking closely, it was the Spalding bag that she’d been carrying around up until now, but whatever was inside was gone, and the bag flattened.

“...?” As I grew wary, again came the voice.

“Why are you in such a state of panic simply because I left your sight for a moment? I’m sure you know the answer very well.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“‘Chasing ghosts’, is it? ...Perhaps the reason for your confusion lies in your desire to do just that. Under normal circumstances, a “terminal” would exhibit plain and simple behavior, but oddly enough, part of you held a conviction so pure that one would never suspect it of being camouflage. So that’s why...”

The voice was indifferent, like a machine operating automatically without a trace of emotion.

“...I don’t really understand what you’re saying right now.” Again, I was aware of a stirring in my heart like before. The voice continued.

“If I speak his ‘name,’ the program hidden within you will activate, but before that let me explain one thing. *He is dead.*”

“...?!”

“He fell in the battle against the Imaginator. I can say this for certain because I confirmed the body personally. So, that makes you a kite with its strings cut, carried by the wind. The source that manipulated you, that forced you to investigate the effects of Kigawa Tosuke’s experiments, no longer exists. You have been aimlessly wandering around asking girls about ‘ghosts’ and Kigawa Tosuke’s ice cream and compiling your report for nothing. Because the one above is no longer here. Do you see, *The Seeker?*”

“...”

“I actually thought that you were investigating something else, but you had exhibited no particular reaction to *that name*. That’s when I had a hunch that Kigawa Tosuke was the one. And, well...I imagine “*he*” abandoned his own mission partway through. Why? Because he fought me. At that point, you had been practically abandoned.

Forgotten...”

The voice spoke *his name*.

“...by Spooky Electric.”

* * * * *

That instant, Nonomura Haruto’s body launched itself at the partition like a loaded spring, shattering the synthetic planks with inhuman speed and power.

“Gi...!”

He raised his head, but there was no intelligence left in his expression. The behavioral patterns in his brain had been overwritten by a brainwashing-type synthetic human, one of which contained the following command: “If anything should interfere with your judgment, lure them to the designated area.” This isolated derelict building was that very spot. But, although he’d brought someone there, his “boss” who’d normally dispose of them had not come, and so he had been reduced to thinking no thoughts beyond his designated role, to behave as a “defense mechanism” that would simply attack any targets who uttered certain keywords.

“Gigigi!”

The noises that came from his throat were not his voice—they were merely sounds. His body movement had surpassed its limits, causing his respiratory organs to creak.

There was a clank from the other side. Once more he sprang, and the shadowy figure nimbly dodged his strike, landing on gracefully on the floor.

“...As promised, I will tell you, Nonomura-san.”

The shadow was more like a pipe than a person, a strange silhouette wrapped in a cloak. On its head sat a large, brimless hat.

“Gi!”

He was not listening. The words hadn’t reached his ears. But the figure spoke on, dodging his attacks all the while.

“...My name is Boogiepop. They tell of me in idle rumors. And in those rumors, it is said that I am an assassin...”

Nonomura launched a kick, but the figure evaded like a leaf in the

wind. In his relentless pursuit, Nonomura knocked over a stack of tanks, and their contents splashed out, covering his head in fruit juice. They had long since fermented, but he paid no heed to the hideously acrid smell.

“Gigiii...!”

He turned again to the figure. It was standing on a leg of the upturned table, swaying on a single point like a *yajirobe*²² balancing toy.

“...A *shinigami*²³, they call me. The legend goes that when a person begins their inevitable decline, Boogiepop appears before them at the most beautiful moment of their life and kills them, before they can become any uglier.²⁴”

Nonomura-san was being well and truly toyed with, but it didn’t bother him in the slightest. He simply continued to lash out.

“...Are the rumors true, you ask? I couldn’t say. But I will say this, Nonomura-san...”

Boogiepop’s expression then was something strange and asymmetrical. One couldn’t tell whether it was mocking, or simply indifferent.

“Your efforts were not in vain. Because ‘ghosts’ do indeed exist.”

Immediately after Boogiepop had said this, there was the *click* of a switch.

* * * * *

Since the very beginning, there had been an explosive compound rigged throughout the building so that it would collapse and dispose of Kigawa Tosuke whenever was deemed necessary. With a loud yet muffled rumble came a tremendous explosion, and the building began to fall in on itself, as if its very framework had been torn out.

A dust cloud rose up, billowing to an immense height like a towering giant. All around, the earth reverberated, shaking the ghost town to its core. Yet the town was devoid of anyone to witness it.

...My head was pounding horribly.

“U-urrgh...”

My body hurt too, but my head was the worst of all—the pain seemed to tighten around it.

And... my cheek. It was weirdly... cold. Really cold. As if it had been pressed directly into ice...

“...Hwaa?!” I came to with a shock.

My cheek had in fact been pressed against something cold: a soda can.

“Finally awake, huh?” came the voice of a girl from above my head. I looked up with trepidation. “You look damn awful.”

There stood a girl of about seventeen or eighteen. She pulled away the can that had been pressed to my cheek and nodded toward me. She wore a leather jumpsuit, and judging from the motorbike by her side, I guessed she was a biker.

“...Ah, aaah...?”

Dazed and confused, I tried to take in my surroundings. It looked like the road of a shopping arcade. The sky looked dim—it seemed dusk was falling, and there was no one else but us on the road.

“H-Huh? What am I doing here?”

“You’re a mess. It’s not good to drink yourself into a stupor,” said the girl in a despondent voice.

“Drink...?”

“Why else would you be lying here on the road? Besides, your ass stinks of alcohol.”

Now that she mentioned it, there was a sweet but also cloying, rotten smell of alcohol about my body. It smelled so bad, I may as well have had my head drenched in it. But...

“A-Alcohol? ...When did I drink that?”

I had no recollection. My most recent memories of what I’d been doing were hazy. I remembered meeting my kouhai Kazuo, and I think he told me about how he was getting married...?



“Here, give your mouth a rinse. It’ll wake you up.” The girl pulled open the tab and then handed the can to me. I took it with a “thanks” and a respectful nod.

“Just so you know, It’s not exactly safe around here. Stories of some poor bastards having all their stuff stolen aren’t uncommon around here. Try to be more careful from now on,” she said straight

up. She had an extremely persuasive way with words.

“Yeah, I’ll be careful... Thank you.”

I took a swig of the isotonic beverage.

“So, where’d you go drinking yesterday?”

“Ah, erm... I’m afraid I don’t really remember.”

“You know anything about the explosion at that building?” She’d asked a strange question.

“What’s that, something bad happen?”

“You’re better off not knowing.” She didn’t explain any more than that. I was enticed by the mysterious air about her.

“Are you... from around these parts?”

“Nope. Just passing through,” she stated casually. But it was a strange time and place for someone to be passing through.

“Where are you from?”

“And why should I tell you that?” Her tone had turned harsh, so I hurriedly explained.

“No, no, I’m not trying to hit on you or anything... It’s just, uh... do you have any interest in phantoms? Like, ghost stories. Have you heard about anything like that? I’m a reporter, you see. I’m compiling them.”

As I spoke, it came back to me. That’s right... That’s what had happened. I’d come here using my holiday to pursue a topic I’d long cherished.

“Phatoms? Really?” She eyed me suspiciously.

“Like, for example... Ah! What was the name again? Boogiepop or something. Ever heard of them?” I’d forgotten where I’d heard the name exactly, but I was sure I’d heard it somewhere.

“.....”

She responded with a long intense glare. And then...

“Pfft!” She immediately began to double over into laughter.

“Ahahahaha! ...You’re researching *him*?”

It felt like she was ridiculing me with every fibre of her being.

“Wait, him? ...No, what I mean is, in the context of the legend, that is...”

“Forget about him. He’s a “shinigami” after all. Don’t come

running to me if you get cursed.”

She cackled at me wickedly. I became extremely wary, seeing that her earlier kindness had all but vanished.

And then, amid my astonishment, she put on her helmet, straddled her bike, and began to rev up the engine. It seemed she was intending to leave.

“W-Wait, hold on a sec! What’s your name?”

“Me? I’m a witch. And no, I’m not kidding. Looks like you got to meet one of your spooks after all.”

With a dauntless laugh, she turned her bike around and drove away, and disappeared from my sight.

“...What was all that about?”

I rose shakily to my legs. My head was still pounding, but the worst of it was over. As I suspected, I didn’t have the groggy feeling of a hangover. And yet my body still stank, and every joint in my body seemed to be creaking at me. It didn’t make any sense. It felt like I’d been bewitched by a fox²⁵.

And then out of the blue...

“So basically, you’re searching for something, and these ghosts are kind of a clue to help you find whatever that is, right?”

I seemed to recall the words of a girl. I looked around, but there was no one there. Was I hearing things because my head was muddled, or had it been a fraction of my memories seeping through? ...Who would have told me such a thing?

“Well, not like it matters...”

I started ambling forward on unsteady legs.

First off, looks like I need to change out of these tattered clothes and rinse off all this dirt and grime. I’ll need to find an early-morning sauna or something somewhere. Then I’ve gotta drink a damn fine cup of hot, black coffee and get my head together.

“Whew, boy...”

I wandered the bright streets in a daze, seeking out something that would make me see lucidly again.



ACT.3
the hopper

hopper [hápər—hóp-]

Meaning:

One who springs or jumps, or any type of machine that hops. Also, a grasshopper, insect of the suborder Caelifera. The boundless energy and grass-green color of the grasshopper is considered a symbol of nature or vitality.

...When was it exactly?

“Tosuke, sometimes I cannot help but feel that I’m an awfully terrible person,” said Kigawa Norisuke with a sigh after he’d finished his ice cream.

“Really? You’ve done bad things? I wanna know about them. Tell me!” Tosuke asked his guardian with patent curiosity.

“Oh, there are many things. For one, I’ve been fooling everyone. Deceiving and lying to everyone around me. Of all the employees who work beneath me, not one of them knows what kind of job it is they’re being made to do.”

“You’re lying? But why?”

“That’s a good question...” Norisuke’s eyes looked distant. “My childhood was at the end of an era²⁶, so I spent my youth without ever really knowing what was right. I struggled on, swearing that I’d find the truth of it all... And what do you know? I found it.”

“Found what?”

“The truth. Although, to the world at large, it’s naught but a lie.”

“...?”

“I’ve been lying constantly to everyone ever since, all for the sake of this truthful lie.”

“...I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. What happened to telling me about the bad things?” Tosuke was a little miffed. Norisuke smiled.

“Ah, I apologize, it seems I’ve bored you. Well then, how about I tell you about the time I managed to cheat someone out of fifty tons of sugar? It was back when the world was still a dangerous place. As for the ones who had the stuff...well, they were a stingy bunch.”

“Uh-huh!”

Tosuke’s eyes sparkled. He was deeply absorbed in the old man’s war stories. The narratives Norisuke spun were peppered with his “eeks” and “ahhs” as if he was witnessing those exact moments himself, his pale-green face turning blue with delight. It was an

incredibly strange sort of blush, but none there would have called it so.

* * * * *

...Bad things, huh?

Even during the daytime, the mountains remained gloomy. Gnarled trees with their thick trunks ran the length of the slope, utterly undeterred by the sheer incline, and from the vines that twined themselves around them hung innumerable leaves. The only traces of light were muted and seemed to carpet the world in a veil of silk. What's more, there was barely anything that could have been used as a foothold. A path was out of the question. Here was a primordial forest in which visitors seldom tread.

But even amid the darkness, one could see the pale-green skin that peeped out from his tattered clothes, now barely sticking to his body. Green it may have been, but it was bright enough to provide no camouflage against the green of it's surroundings. If anything, it was even more prominent.

What makes something...bad?

He muttered to himself as he crossed the sheer incline one could barely call a slope. Feeling the way forward with his hands, it was hard to say whether he was crawling or tracing a wall.

Occasionally his messy hair, which fell to his shoulders, would get caught on a vine, but he carried on without trying to push it away, ignoring it until it either became untangled or was pulled out from its roots. Did he feel no pain, or was it no longer on a level that could bother him? Whatever the answer, it seemed evident that he had already adapted to the place.

From time to time, he would stop and glance around, catch a bug darting around on the ground, and toss the protein-packed clump into his mouth. And even as he did these things, he still continued to wonder.

Bad things, huh...

He roamed on with unsteady feet. It had been almost four months now.

Back then, he'd protected Sonoko from an unseen attack, taking advantage of the confusion afterward to escape, and he'd been living this way ever since.

It would be a lie to say that he felt no shock at his staggering fall from grace, but because he'd resolved at the decisive moment not to be found out, as there wouldn't be anywhere left for him to go anyway, he'd more or less come to terms with it already. The injuries he'd sustained had healed in no time at all. He was surprised about it himself. He appeared to possess an extraordinary life force that could not be extinguished. Far from killing him, the hit hadn't even knocked him unconscious...

I wonder... just how much Norisuke knew about all of this.

Norisuke hadn't had this kind of power. That much was clear by looking at the old man's somewhat ailing figure. He'd even nursed him, and there was never anything about his body that could have suggested immortality.

Tosuke knew he was different from normal people, but in truth, he never thought he'd be this different. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Other thoughts also crossed his mind. How long could he keep this up, living hidden in the mountains like this? Until he died? Or no, perhaps even death would not be granted to him...

Not that there was anything he could do about it. He simply lived his life in a haze.

Ice cream, and the people that enjoyed it seemed so terribly far away. It felt like a story from a world made only of dreams. He couldn't possibly have been there.

No...

There was one. One person whom he still couldn't bear to think about.

But he didn't expect to ever see her again. He mustn't. She told him it was problematic for her to be around him. He couldn't go to her.

“.....”

He shook his head faintly. He'd been trying to live without thinking, but try as he might, he could not erase the thoughts from his

head. Before he knew it, all sorts of things would come flooding back to him.

I should head back to the hideout...

He began to head toward the cave in which he lived, taking a different route from the path he'd come from. He was acting on instinct, but the technique was one that wild animals such as bears used to confound pursuers and avoid those lying in wait. That instinct was what warned his body with a jolt on the way back.

“.....!”

He flattened himself against a rock and cast his eyes downslope.

On the modest shore of a trickling stream, there stood a man. He didn't seem to be looking his way in particular. In one hand he held some kind of board, while the other moved industriously—he was sketching.

...He's drawing?

It certainly seemed that way, but it was strange for someone to come all the way out here while apparently wearing no gear. Aside from the sketchbook and related implements, only a picnic basket lay at his feet.

I wonder if he lives nearby?

It was possible that he lived in some kind of woodland cabin. But for it to be so deep in the woods, the surrounding trees would have had to be cut down, and there would need to be a path cleared for cars to pass through. He hadn't seen anything like that.

...Who could he be?

His sketch appeared to capture the whole panorama. He was constantly shifting his eyes and moving his hand across the sketchbook, its pages rolled over.

The man was fast. His hand movements suggested considerable experience. *He* hadn't ever drawn before, but he felt that this man's movements were much like his own when he used to make ice cream.

“.....”

He realized he'd become entranced in the man's work. Without making a sound, he moved, shakily, closer to the man. Naturally, he'd been longing for human company.

In the end, he stayed rooted to the spot the whole time until the sun went down and the man packed up and left. Even when he'd returned to his hideout, he couldn't take his mind off one thing: Just who was that man...?

And so, the following day, he went back to the same place again. The man, as he expected, was still drawing away. And he would stay engrossed in his work the whole time, from morning to dusk. His powers of concentration were undeniably brilliant. And Tosuke, too, continued to gaze at this the whole time. That he could achieve such a state might have been quite a feat in and of itself, but the person in question had no awareness of that fact.

Both he and the man went on like this together for almost three days. As he observed, he noticed that, for having such apparent composure and refined technique, the man was rather young. He'd met all sorts of people once, back when he lived in human society, but he got the impression that the man wasn't like any of them.

If only I could speak to him...

The thought drifted into his mind. But it was a fleeting desire.

If he just sauntered out into the open with his creepy skin, the man would run away and never come back—that, or they'd start combing the mountains to catch him. Yeah. The people who'd tried to kill him and Sonoko would surely sniff him out and come to attack him.

That's right... I swore, never again... Not with anyone...

It was the irrefutable truth.

So just watching like this was enough. Probably, what the man was doing was a study, or a sketch for him to picture things in his head. Once he'd finished the actual final piece, it was sure to be something wonderful. And that alone was fun to imagine.

On the fourth day, the man was nowhere to be seen.

“.....”

He'd known it would happen, but he couldn't help feeling assaulted by a terrible dismay. He staggered into the open, even going up to the spot where the man had been standing till now.

“Haah...” he sighed, looking around at the scenery like the man had done. But from his point of view, that scenery inspired no feelings in him—it was simply a mountain. He couldn’t find the “beauty one wishes to capture in a painting” or anything close to whatever the man had seen.

“Haah...”

He slumped himself down on the spot. Gazing listlessly at his feet, there was a glimpse of a shadow on the ground. Thinking it to be a cloud he looked up, and there stood a young man.

“.....”

His eyes grew wide as he stared at the figure.

“Hi there.” The man gave a curt bow, smiling. “So, you’re the one who’s been observing me lately.”

“.....”

“I have to admit, I was a little frightened at first. But now I’m relieved. You really were just watching me draw, weren’t you?”

The man’s tone was incredibly gentle, betraying no trace of agitation or fear.

“.....”

He couldn’t form an answer. So instead, the man asked him.

“If I recall, you’re...Kigawa Tosuke, aren’t you? I saw you in a magazine.”

His body tensed with a twitch.

“Wh...who are you? Why don’t you...?”

Why wasn’t this man afraid of him? And if he was after him, how come he wasn’t attacking?

“Why...aren’t you running away, even after you’ve seen me?”

“Because I have no reason to run from you. Though, I do have a need to thank you for taking an interest in my art.”

“No, but that’s...”

“You’re a kind person. I can see that very clearly.”

The man gave a nod. He was unfazed.

“You...don’t look think I’m weird after looking at me?”

“That goes for the both of us, then. You could never tell by looking, but on the inside, I’m a pretty strange guy.” The man winked

mischievously.

“...Just who are you?”

In response, the man quietly answered. “My name is Asukai Jin.”

“—Orihata-san! Attention, please!”

The sharp rebuke almost caused Aya to drop her bowl and spoon.

“S-sorry!” she apologized immediately. But the instructor, Kusunoki Rei, was merciless.

“You sample the product, then you pass it on. I’ve told you this before, correct? Efficiency is everything in this line of work!” she said, criticizing her sharply. Then, turning to face everyone, she loudly added, “And that goes for all of you as well!”

“I’m really, very sorry!”

Apologizing, Aya passed the bowl of peppermint green-colored ice cream to the student next to her. The kid winked and comforted her with a quiet reassurance. Aya returned a nod, as if to thank them.

It was a cooking school. After dropping out of high school last month, Orihata Aya had been in attendance here. Having joined mid-term, she’d been working hard every day to make up for the lost time.

Once the confectionary workshop had finished, Aya breathed a sigh of relief. At which point, her classmate, Natsuko, patted her on the shoulder.

“Aya, really, don’t worry about it. It isn’t always like this.”

“Yeah, that teacher’s always lashing out at someone,” added another student, Tezuka, with a nod. “Just the other day, she was like, ‘You’re stirring too slowly!’ and she gave me the biggest glare. Man, that gave me a scare.”

“I get that she’s got talent...but she shouldn’t have to be such a diva about it.”

“Probably cause she’s young. Isn’t she, supposed to be like, about twenty?”

“And despite that, she’s already the executive of a cake company, huh... She’s a genius, that’s for sure.”

“I guess us amateurs’ll never know what geniuses are thinking...”

Natsuko and Tezuka sighed in tandem. Their timing was so unexpectedly perfect that Aya had to laugh.

“Thanks, guys,” she said. It was easy to beat herself up about

things, and she knew that they were trying to cheer her up.

“Yeah, lighten up, okay?” Natsuko patted her on the shoulder a second time.

“But Orihata, serious question... Why did you freeze up back there?” asked Tezuka, her tone turned serious.

“Hm? Oh, uh, that’s because...”

“Did you...notice it too?”

“...Yeah.”

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Uh...so, this ‘original’ ice cream that Kusunoki-sensei claims to have made? I’m...pretty sure I’ve tasted that flavor before, somewhere else. Right, Orihata?”

“...Yeah.”

Once, her boyfriend, Taniguchi Masaki, had treated her to ice cream, telling her that the place had gotten rave reviews. It was delicious, for sure. And she felt that the fundamental flavor of the ice cream that Kusunoki Rei had just brought out was the same.

Natsuko was turning pale. “Wait a second. I-isn’t that... plagiarism?”

“I dunno, but...”

“I mean, Kusunoki-sensei won a lot of awards in contests, and she’s had a bunch of products on sale, and... And... —What does this mean?”

The three of them had just gone silent when the chime rang out. It was time to prepare for the next class. If they didn’t get a move on, they’d get a similar earful from another teacher.

The girls hastily began to get ready.

* * * * *

Asukai Jin was, in fact, a peculiar man.

The log house that he’d brought Tosuke to was full of painting utensils, yet there was little that could count as furniture.

“Anything you’d like to eat?” he asked. But one had to doubt that there was anything at all.

“...Ice cream.”

He thought he might as well ask, but Asukai smiled.

“Sorry. No fridge. All I’ve got are MREs²⁷ and instant food. There’s potatoes and rice too though, if you’d like,” he answered. “There’s still some leftover miso soup from this morning. How about we go with that?”

He lit the stove and warmed up the pot. Once Tosuke took the steaming bowl, he came to his senses.

“...Thank you. This is the first time I’ve eaten something proper in a long time.”

“It is a guy’s cooking, though, not to mention I’m up against a pro. Don’t judge me too harshly.”

“No...it’s good.”

It really was good—packed full of daikon, burdock root, and all kinds of mushrooms. Outside of sweet things, Tosuke normally couldn’t really gauge whether food was good or bad, but he truly thought that he’d never had such delicious miso soup.

“By the way, Kigawa-san, why are you up here living in the mountains?” he asked, pouring a cup of tea for himself.

“.....”

Tosuke was silent.

“...Because I don’t really have anywhere else to go.”

“I wonder. I’m sure that, if you put your mind to it, you’d have the talent to blend right in among human society. That is, in fact, what you’ve been doing, isn’t it?”

“.....”

It’s true that Teratsuki Kyouichirou had taught him a lot. But...

“Well then, what about you? How come you’re up here drawing in such a secluded place?” he countered, trying to dodge the subject.

Like Tosuke, Asukai’s face darkened.

“True... You have a point. Things don’t easily go the way you want them to, do they?” he murmured, and took a gentle sip of tea.

Tosuke’s eyes widened.

“So, you...messed something up as well?”

“More or less...” A self-deprecating smile formed on Asukai’s face. “I failed to jump from the top of the tower.”

“Huh?” This surprised Tosuke. “W-what do you...”

But Asukai appeared to have no intention of continuing, and the question was left hanging.

“.....”

“.....”

The two of them continued to drink their miso soup and tea in silence. After a time, Asukai spoke up.

“How about...?” he asked.

Tosuke looked up—he hadn’t heard him very well. “Hm?”

“I asked you if you wanted a refill,” Asukai answered, grinning.

“Ah, yes. Please.”

Tosuke offered up the bowl with an embarrassed smile. Taking it in his hands, Asukai casually asked, “So which part of the Towa Organization did you belong to?”

“Huh? What did you say?” replied Tosuke, not understanding what he meant.

“Ah, forget I said anything. I was mistaken,” replied Asukai immediately, dropping the subject.

“.....?”

Tosuke tilted his head as he received a second helping and resumed eating. Asukai regarded him with a complex gaze.

.....So he doesn’t know. Did they have him completely in the palm of their hand? Or had nobody simply told him?

Asukai then wondered what to do.

“About your...name.”

“Yeah, it’s Kigawa Tosuke.”

“So Kigawa is your...?”

“Ah...kind of. He’s the one who took me in. Sort of a foster parent,” Tosuke answered with a smile. “I don’t even know where I came from, myself.”

“I see. ...But that’s equally true even for me, and for every one of us.”

“...Maybe so. What with everyone neglecting their pain...” replied Tosuke in a murmur.

“Pain? What do you mean by that?”

Tosuke then spoke the plain truth, to which Asukai nodded, not taken aback in the slightest.

“That’s similar to my power,” he said calmly. “But what I see are what you might call ‘flaws in the heart’.”

“Huh?” Tosuke’s eyes grew wide, but he knew from Asukai’s calmness that his words were no joke.

There was a brief silence, but not because any particular mood had filled the air. It was a perfectly normal self-introduction. Tosuke nodded to himself thoughtfully.

“So then, what does this pain of mine that you feel tell you?” Asukai continued.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what my flaws are too,” Tosuke asked back with a smirk.

Asukai drew in his chin and spoke serenely.

“You don’t really have any ‘leaves’. You must think that life provides no nourishment.”

“Spot on. But the same goes for you too, Jin. Because your pain is the vague type. I’ve got no idea exactly which ice cream would be good for you. In that sense, you’re really similar...to Rei...” In the instant that he’d spoken her name, Tosuke’s face clouded over.

“Rei’. So that’s one of the big holes in your heart,” said Asukai almost in a whisper, and Tosuke looked downward.

“...I really don’t have any nourishment, it’s true,” murmured Tosuke despondently.

Asukai replied coolly. “Then it’s the same for both of us.”

The two of them shared stories of their past.

“...That’s amazing.”

Upon hearing of Asukai’s strange scheme to “try and fill the flaws in people’s hearts,” Tosuke was genuinely impressed.

“You can do that? I wonder if there’s someone out there who can perfectly fill in the flaw in mine.”

“Actually, it didn’t turn out all that well in the end. I was arrogant. Flaws weren’t something you could simply work out by sticking two people together. I learned that the hard way.”

“It’s still incredible. The fact that you were trying to fight against those absences is something that other people wouldn’t even dare to attempt. It’s really noble of you, Jin.” Tosuke regarded him with admiration. But Jin shook his head.

“No, you’ve got it the wrong way around, Kigawa-san,” he answered, to Tosuke’s surprise.

“Huh?”

“I think you’re the one who was filling in everyone’s flaws, and greatly so. With that miraculous ice cream of yours.”

Tosuke blinked by Asukai’s words.

“I...never meant to.”

“But in the end, that’s what happened. Your ice cream, which soothes the pain of the heart, might have been a superior method by far. My plan paled in comparison.”

Asukai’s words were sincere.

“...I wonder.”

“I think people probably acknowledged you far more than what you ever thought. I think they valued you.”

“...I don’t know. I don’t want to admit it, but in the end, it was only ice cream. Though I don’t like saying things like this,” said Tosuke dismissively. “I tried so incredibly hard, but in the end, wasn’t everyone simply scarfing it all down?”

“Is that what you think? Is that something you could say to Kigawa Norisuke-san too, the man who raised you?”

Asukai’s words were tinged with anger, bringing Tosuke back to his senses.

“No... You’re right. It’s hard on Norisuke to be talking like this,” he said, nodding sincerely. Asukai saw this and smiled.

“I knew you were better than that, Kigawa-san.”

“Tosuke’s fine. In fact, just call me Tosuke. It feels like you’re teasing me when you say ‘san’.”

Asukai smiled wryly at his little sulk.

“I hadn’t intended to make fun of you. After all, you’re the president, aren’t you?”

“...That right there is what I’d call teasing.”

Asukai smiled even more broadly, and Tosuke became even more sullen. But when he happened to turn his head toward the canvasses that Asukai had piled up against the wall, his eyes lit up.

“Ah, those are your pictures, right? Can I take a look?”

No sooner than had he cheerily finished asking, he was already touching them.

“Oh, they’re nothing special.” Asukai was a little embarrassed.

“Hmmm. A girl, huh?”

“No, it’s a picture of a ghost,” he said quietly.

But Tosuke, deeply entranced by the painting, didn’t give much thought to the other man’s words, and openly voiced his opinion.

“It’s an unusual painting, huh? It’s pretty, but you can’t tell what the girl’s thinking. What kind of person was the model?”

“I didn’t know very well myself. I don’t think I could fully understand what it was that she was thinking.”

“Oh yeah?” said Tosuke, moving on to the next painting. That was when his face broke into a smile.

“Aha. Now the girl in this one, I understand.”

“Hm?”

“Jin, you like this girl, don’t you?”

It wasn’t a question, but an affirmation. Asukai was a little lost for words.

“...What makes you think that?”

“Not ‘think’. I know.” Tosuke nodded to himself in agreement. “You didn’t draw this one using a model for reference, did you? You drew her from memory. That’s why I feel your honest wishes through it. You were thinking of how wonderful it would be if you could soothe her pain.”

“.....”

Asukai, having been read like a book, couldn’t hide his surprise. This was the second time someone had been on the mark about something only he knew, and in both cases, they had been amateurs when it came to art. The first was a very intelligent girl, and now it was Tosuke. But he believed that the two of them had no connection with one another.

(Suema Kazuko... There was something about her that was similar to me, so her, I can understand, but in Kigawa Tosuke's case, it can't be because of talent or emotional sensitivity.)

Just as Asukai's surprise had begun to wear off, he felt fear crawling up his spine. Could it be that his power was like the *thing* that once controlled him...?

"Kigawa-san, you—"

"Tosuke. I told you."

He'd been told off, but this time Asukai corrected himself and asked him again without any teasing.

"Tosuke. You...haven't met a black, *shinigami*-like figure, have you?"

"Huh? What now?"

"So you haven't met him?" Asukai insisted.

"What are you talking about?" Tosuke was perplexed.

"Because if you have," Asukai said with a sigh, "you might need to prepare yourself. You'll likely be considered an 'enemy of the world.'"

"The 'world'...?" Tosuke frowned. This was the third time he'd heard that word being used in this strange fashion. Teratsuki Kyouichirou had said it not long ago when he asked him "Don't you feel like showing your talents to the world?" And the very first time...

* * * * *

"Tosuke, I've become painfully aware of the fact that the world is a place made up of envy and hatred." Kigawa Norisuke had said this after he'd come home looking disgusted and had greedily finished off Tosuke's ice cream.

"Something's happened, hasn't it? You've got a lot on your plate."

Tosuke was used to this, so his reply was somewhat flippant. To which Norisuke chuckled to himself and returned to his usual self.

"By now, you must more or less understand from watching the television and all that what it's like outside. Tell me, Tosuke, what do you think of the world?"

"Dunno. I don't know much about it. And I'm not sure that I really want to." Tosuke spoke somewhat indifferently, and the old man

smiled at his perhaps innocent attitude.

“If only everyone could be like you. From the bottom of my heart, I dream that humans could live in a world where they only had to think of delicious things. Wonderful things.” The old man narrowed his eyes, as if Tosuke were a brilliant light before him. Tosuke dished out another helping of ice cream, paying no particular heed to the old man’s rambling.

“Tosuke, you mustn’t go outside. It’s an ugly place out there, filled with dreadful things. I refuse to let those things poison you. But...” The old man sighed, much like he always did. “I can’t help but think I’ve been monopolizing you like this. Is there some way of letting you outside? It would have to be a way guaranteed to prevent you from ruining your beauty. What to do...”

Just as he finished another sigh, Tosuke’s new creation was placed on the table.

“Oho. You made another one? But this is...” The old man looked happy but observed the ice cream with a critical eye.

“Yep. This one’s matcha flavor.”

“You know I’m not keen on these peculiar Japanese things.” The old man’s preference was Italian gelato.

“Come on, don’t knock it till you’ve tried it. I didn’t just pick a Japanese flavor without good reason,” said Tosuke with a wink.

Suspiciously, the old man raised the ice cream to his lips, and a cry of awe slipped out.

“Ohhh! This is...!” It was a familiar scene, with a familiar exchange. But now, the spoon that the old man held paused in mid-air.

“I was naïve. Anything you touch really does turn into something wonderful, doesn’t it? It’s like magic. It would be a such a shame to smother that talent... Or perhaps, you just might be able to turn all the ugly things into something wonderful. But...if you do that, then you’ll...” He shut his mouth here. It wasn’t like him, and Tosuke peered at his face.

“What’s wrong?” he inquired.

“...Tosuke, do you remember the other day, when I said that the

world was made up of lies?”

“Yeah.”

“When the time comes for you to go outside, those lies will likely try to control you and use you...and you won’t be able to do anything about it. When I found you, my treasure, I discovered what it truly means to be happy. But what about you?” The old man gazed at Tosuke with sad eyes. Tosuke was perplexed.

“Though you would be able to make others happy, your own personal happiness may be out of reach... I can’t help but feel it is so. Maybe that is your destiny. After all, your talent’s worth can only be equalled by that of the world.

“Well, if it isn’t Asukai-san! Let me guess—you ran out of salt, yeah?” Kishida Machiko, who ran the general store at the base of the mountain, broke into a smile at her unexpected customer.

“Actually, I thought I might stock up on a bit of food.” Asukai Jin unloaded the rucksack he was carrying onto the floor. It would be full on the way back.

“That reminds me! You know that picture of yours I’ve been holding onto? It finally sold the other day. It amazes me how simple pencil drawings on sketch paper like that can sell!”

“You don’t say. That’s great news,” said Asukai, starting to rummage through the canned food on the shelves.

“Err, so, how much do I owe you again?” Machiko attempted to hand over the chit, but Asukai was insistent.

“No, no, that was my gift to you. There’s no need to waste your money on me.”

“Even so... You’ve got to assert yourself when it comes to these things. I suppose you probably don’t concern yourself with them much, being an artist.”

Machiko didn’t want to just treat Asukai as a shopkeeper would a customer. She’d rather take care of him on a more personal level, as Asukai the “young artist”. Asukai laughed, brushing off her comment.

“Well then, please make today’s purchase free of charge. That’ll do.”

“I still don’t think that would be enough, personally... Don’t you want to know how much it sold for? Is that something you artist types don’t have an interest in?”

“No, they say that the likes of Picasso, for example, were extremely particular about how much they wanted their paintings to sell for. I don’t think it was out of material need, but because they wanted to know to what extent their art would be acknowledged from a societal perspective.”

Asukai spoke gently, without the slightest trace of disdain. He had a worldly way of putting things—at least, that’s the impression he

gave—and he was particularly good at it.

“An artist, in themselves, is a useless individual who doesn’t create a thing. The point where they first acquire meaning is when someone forms an interest in them. And money happens to be a convenient medium, being the most popular known commodity.”

“...Oookay. But how are you any different?”

“Oh, I’m no different. It’s just that where I am now, I haven’t yet grasped my own art. It would be problematic if I were to rush ahead and have myself evaluated now.”

“Huh. Not easy, is it?” Machiko was deeply impressed.

“But I am essentially a cheapskate, and here’s the evidence,” said Asukai, indicating the products lined up at the register. There were many times the usual amount.

“So you do have a good head on those shoulders! Well, at least there’s that,” chuckled Machiko. “Oh, that’s right!”

She stood up midway through working the cash register and vanished into the back of the shop. She and her husband’s house lay beyond. She reappeared a little later with a box. A box of confectionery, to be precise.

“Here, give this a try as well.”

“What is it?”

“It’s cake, dear! Given to me as a gift at a wedding ceremony the other day. I swear to you, it is de-licious.”

“Are you sure?”

“I was there with the hubby, so we got landed with two of the same!”

“Haha, I see.”

Asukai lifted the beautifully wrapped package that held the square sponge cake in his hand. His eyes caught the name of the maker printed on it, and he let out a small gasp. Only a short time ago had he heard the name come up in conversation.

Looks like I found myself a good souvenir.

He smiled and turned to Machiko.

“Fantastic. I’ll take it. How much will that be?” he asked. Machiko laughed.

“I’m not taking your money! Besides, it was never on sale to begin with.”

“Well then, allow me to take it off your hands.”

Asukai gathered his luggage and headed back up the mountain.

* * * * *

“.....”

In the forest outside the lodge, Tosuke sat focusing his mind in deep contemplation. He didn’t really need to meditate specifically, but it was something Kigawa Norisuke used to do. So, he thought to imitate him.

He was working hard to try and grasp the feeling in his chest, which had up until now only been a vague “something,” as a more concrete emotion.

He was sparring... and his partners were his memories of the people he’d met up to this point.

He distinctly recalled the pain that they’d placed on him. It was as if, once it was impressed upon him, it left an indelible mark. Which is why Tosuke was able to reflect on it as clear as day, even if he didn’t try particularly hard to recall it.

“If you can capture it as I do, as a concrete “flower”-like image, your sense of it will all come together,” Asukai Jin had explained to him when they were contrasting their powers, but as Tosuke had no powers of visualization, he gave up on this.

What Tosuke was attempting was to identify pain directly as a flavor of ice cream.

Until now, He’d only made these conclusions on an individual level—a certain flavor for a certain pain; however, Tosuke had also been constantly working, to the very best of his abilities, on making ice cream for many people at once. He was fairly confident that he could roughly work out his issue without needing to examine and test-test anything.

If he could point to a single flavor of ice cream, he might be able to interact with the people with whom he’d formerly had awkward interactions with a bit better in the same stroke. He was always

feeling their pain, after all...

In the same stroke ... That's right. I've been slacking off on that until now.

Such were his thoughts after having listened to Asukai. It occurred to him that, compared to the effort Jin had been making, everything he'd been doing up until now was effortless. He'd been relying too heavily on the gratification he felt when people like Kigawa Norisuke, Teratsuki Kyouichirou and Furukita Sonoko tasted his ice cream, and had never tried to understand who he truly was.

And so, for the first time in his life, he was thinking of himself. He who shared no common skin color with any other; he who was different from others.

He'd made a lot of ice cream, but now he wondered what sort of ice cream he would personally enjoy.

What would that be...?

Various ideas floated into his head, but everything that came to mind was for other people. This one was suited to her. That one is meant for him.

Perhaps it was his number one specialty, the peppermint flavor? The flavor that he'd continued to make despite the fact that Kigawa Norisuke wasn't very fond of it?

But no, that didn't seem to fit either. He even felt like that was meant for someone else. But again...who that someone else was, he didn't know.

"Have you ever thought about taking over the world with ice cream?" Teratsuki Kyouichirou had once said to him. Perhaps that really had been the case. Perhaps he'd been constantly seeking out that flavor so that the world would still acknowledge him, a world that would surely never accept him for who he was.

"In that case, how about I scrape together an environment that would let you make ice cream?" Asukai had offered. But to tell the truth, he was divided. Everyone he'd worked with before had all died. Asukai had laughed, calling it a jinx: one of those people was in his old age, and the other had had an accident that had nothing to do with him. Still, Tosuke was scared.

He couldn't help feeling bad about the way Asukai was pampering him. He wondered if the very fact that he was alive was an extremely bad thing...

Feeling bad... Bad things... I've thought about such things before, huh...

Tosuke broke his concentration for a moment.

It was expected that he'd be tired after several hours straight. It seemed to him that he'd been thinking superfluous things the whole time.

What makes something a truly bad thing...?

He thought deeply about this vague and insignificant question.

Had it been bad for him to make everyone eat his ice cream? That's why he'd been abandoned and left to wander in the mountains? If it had been a bad thing, then why?

Why...?

At that moment, the sound of an engine began to rumble, coming from downhill. Tosuke stood up. It was the sound of Asukai's off-road bike. He'd been using it to go up and down the mountain despite there being almost no proper roads of any kind. Apparently, it had been specially modified in various ways. The tank had been enlarged and the gears had been adjusted to prioritize power in exchange for speed. Well, it was something to that effect. It seems he'd got some person named Kirima Nagi to make it for him.

Tosuke had made it back to the lodge at practically the same time that Asukai arrived.

"Welcome back."

"Yeah. How's it looking?" asked Asukai, taking off his helmet.

Tosuke shook his head. "It's just not going to work for me like it did for you."

"Well, these things take time." Asukai gave him a firm pat on the head. This tickled Tosuke, because it was the kind of action an older brother might give his little brother. "Ah yes, I brought you a present. I'll tell you now; it's not ice cream, but it's not far off either."

Jin was talking about the cake he'd got from the general store. A sharp pain shot through Tosuke's chest.

“...Rei’s cake, huh.”

“I doubt she made it herself, but I thought it might serve to show you that she’s working hard.” Jin went into the lodge, suggesting that they have a drink; Tosuke followed, and sat down on a chair.

“Jin... You’re a good person,” he said, watching the rising steam of the coffee being poured in front of him.

He’d spoken in earnest, but Jin laughed at him.

“I don’t know about that. You’re speaking to a villain who could very nearly have been a threat to the world here.”

“.....” Tosuke again fell into thought.

“Something wrong?”

“Hey, Jin? ...Was what you did really all that bad?”

“I believe so.” Jin’s answer was immediate.

“But...you did what you did because you thought it was right, didn’t you?”

“If that’s what you’re arguing, then you might as well say that nothing bad exists in this world. Because everyone lives believing that what they’re doing is right.”

“Well then, why do you only now think it was bad? You came to these mountains yourself because you realized you’d committed a crime, right?”

“.....” Asukai shut his mouth for a moment, but soon nodded. “When I was doing what I did, I hurt a girl in the process. If I hadn’t done such a thing, that would never have happened to her. That’s when I started to regret my actions. I clearly hadn’t been observant enough,” he said quietly.

“And that was a bad thing?”

“Yes, I think that lack of consideration is a crime.”

“...I...wasn’t thinking anything. Do you think that’s a bad thing?”

“You can’t have not been thinking at all.”

“...All I wanted is for everyone to eat tasty ice cream. That’s all.”

“That doesn’t seem like a bad thing to me. Weren’t you merely tossed about by the wicked flow around you?”

“No... I...kind of feel...that I was the worst of them all.”

Tosuke recalled Rei’s parting words.

“You don’t know yourself. When I’m with you, all that ends up happening is... I start to forget the pain.”

The words had accused him. They should have been what Rei truly felt. He couldn’t possibly believe that he hadn’t done wrong.

...Wait.

That’s right... Pain.

Everyone harbours a pain of their own, and he had erased that. Ice cream was merely a means of achieving that end. So then, was it a bad thing?

Take Kigawa Norisuke, for example. It seemed the old man had taken part in some kind of great “lie.” It seemed that he’d been extremely troubled by it. But in the end, he never confronted whatever it was. As for why... Could the reason have been because he’d been eating Tosuke’s ice cream every day?

“...!”

He... Was that the sort of thing he’d been doing?

Come to think of it, ever since Furukita Sonoko had started eating his ice cream, it seemed as if she’d practically stopped being hurt by others. What if it wasn’t that she’d stopped being hurt, but that she’d become unable to be hurt? If you take away the pain, doesn’t that mean that you can’t receive pain from others?

...Wait, hold on. What is all this? What am I even thinking right now?

His thoughts were becoming so complicated, it made even his head spin.

“...Tosuke?” Asukai looked at him with concern. “What’s wrong? Do you need to lie down?”

“N-no, it’s nothing... Though I am looking a bit pale,” he joked masochistically.

Asukai seemed unsure how to respond, but then settled on a smile. Tosuke forced himself to sound positive.

“Let’s go eat that cake! It’d be a shame to let it go to waste,” he declared loudly.

The two of them opened the wrapping and took a bite of the cake.

“...Yeah. I’d say it’s pretty tasty, wouldn’t you?” said Asukai,

impressed. And it was in fact delicious. However...

“.....”

The moment Tosuke placed the spoonful upon his tongue, his body stiffened. Asukai was taken aback by his abnormal expression.

It displayed anger.

His eyes were wide. His cheeks trembled. He looked furious enough to break into a rampage at any second.

“...What is this?” he murmured, his voice, too, quivering unnaturally. “This...? You’re telling me this is Rei’s cake? That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” he roared.

As Asukai remained struck dumb with astonishment, Tosuke flung the rest of the cake into his mouth and crushed it between his teeth with the ferocity of a child avenging his parents, swallowed, and then continued to rage.

“This... This can’t have been the flavor Rei was looking for! Because this... This is my flavor!”

After that, he stood up and dashed out of the lodge like a whirlwind.

“H-hey!”

Asukai rushed after him, but by the time he’d gone outside Tosuke was already far away and had begun leaping down toward the base of the mountain.

Watching him, he covered about five meters in height and fifty in distance in a single bound. No human could possibly hope to catch up to him.

So that’s the kind of thing he can do when he’s serious. I’d pictured him as a delicate soul because of all the ice cream, all the soft things he’d been making, but...this is crazy.

Asukai sighed.

“His mobility is on another level—it’ll be impossible to catch up to him even with the bike. He’s like a grasshopper. But just what could have got him riled up like that...?”

Whatever had spurred him on and wherever he was headed, there was surely nobody that could stop him now.

“.....”

Asukai watched him disappear into the distance and shook his head.

“Tosuke, whatever the reason, in the end you managed to find the resolve you needed to leave the mountain. Perhaps...it’s time for me to make a move too.”

A chilly wind swept up the mountain from the base, rustling through the boughs of the trees.

“No good. You can’t keep using such half-hearted colors. It has to really pop out.”

Designer Semigasawa Suguru looked at the sample packaging that had just arrived and sharply scolded his assistant.

“I-I’m very sorry.”

The assistant went pale. Though effeminate in his speech, Suguru’s strict nature toward his job was clear in his voice.

“In any case, you’re going to have to start over. When the situation really calls for it, it’s important to use daring colors. If you rely on careful color schemes all the time, then that will be the most you’ll be able to create.”

“Y-yes, sir!” The assistant shrunk down, lowering their head.

“Whew...” Semigasawa sat down at his desk and set to work on the packaging design for the new bridal gift cake set that Kusunoki Rei was trying her hand at right now. He’d already worked through the basic image with Rei herself, so it was just a matter of putting it all together.

“Still... It’s such a waste of Rei-chan,” he muttered, not making much sense to those around him.

Just then, the cell phone sitting on the table started to buzz.

He answered. But what he heard on the other end wasn’t someone’s voice—it was a static noise that crackled like the sound of chirping insects. And then it suddenly broke off.

“.....”

Semigasawa stood up from his desk. His face seemed expressionless at first glance, but if someone had been paying attention, they would have noticed. They’d have noticed that the mask-like expression was one he rarely ever wore.

“Something came up. I’ll be right back. Answer any calls for me, would you? Don’t forward them to me.”

Leaving a nearby member of staff with this message, he set out from the office. His small, personal, Japanese-brand car tore out of the parking lot at full throttle. Its handling and acceleration were much

better than typical cars of the same make.

...Unbelievable. To think that he'd really show up...

He even seemed to be somewhat gritting his teeth.

* * * * *

...There was, in an age where you'd never see one, a western-style house that looked just like a castle.

Its windows were caked in a thick layer of dust, suggesting that its occupants were long gone, and the trails of the rain dripping from the eaves colored the building in broad stripes as if a giant had come along and poured chocolate sauce on it from above.

The doors of the gate hung open lazily...but only the chains that dangled in the wind revealed that it hadn't always been that way.

Those chains, which had been tightly sealing the gate, had been wrenched apart at the center. It was an indication that the door had been forced open with a strength the maker of those chains could never have imagined. And the bolt, too, fallen from the door, had gouged out the flagstones on the ground, drawing a curve like one made with a compass. It was freshly made, making one fully aware that the violent act had occurred only recently.

And there were a single set of footprints, leading toward the mansion. Tracing them, they did not lead to the entrance, but carried on to the back garden. Here, only weeds grew, feeble and desiccated, and, despite their splendid form, it was clear that no one had any desire to tend to these plants. It was into this foliage that the footsteps led. And then, at the corner of the garden, they stopped.

Immediately in front of that, was a hole.

There lay a square entrance that led to a secret underground passage. But the strange thing about that hidden door was that, for being a hidden door, it no longer had a lid with which it could be closed. *That* had been flattened and smashed to pieces below. It was likely that someone had kicked it in from above, because, normally, this hidden door could only be opened from underneath, and the one who had opened it knew that very well.

A noise could be heard from the hole—a kind of rustling sound.

Proceeding down the steps, the passage gave way to an underground chamber. Though underground, it didn't feel at all dingy. It was spacious enough, and though the ceiling was streaked with piled-up dust, light from the outside world dimly poured in from the windows.

In that chamber, deeper still, were storage units hidden beneath the floor. These had been opened, and the various boxes that had been tightly packed inside of them had been taken out. All of them were apparently sealed tight and insulated from external heat. The faint buzz that could be heard was apparently the sound of a private generator running.

The cords that snaked along the floor were linked to rows of refrigerators. And among them, a lone figure was moving at pace.

It was a tall silhouette, working away busily like a mouse²⁸ on a treadmill. They were muttering something under their breath.

“...I see. I knew it. So that's how it is...” He spoke while licking the semi-solid substance from the bowl in his hand. “Now I finally understand why I was so obsessed with ice cream, and nothing else. I wanted to ‘freeze’ it. If I'd left it unchecked, it would have all spilled over, so I did what I could to reduce the effect of the ‘component,’ if even a little...”

He sighed. Then he lifted his head and turned to look *this* way.

“You're the third person to come here. The first was Kigawa Norisuke—he built this place. The second was the one who brought me out of here, Teratsuki Kyouichirou. And it looks like you're the third and final one. So tell me, Semigasawa Suguru. What part did you play in all of this?”

“...My real name is Squeeze. It's the codename that was given to me, a combat-type synthetic human,” said he who had been using the name of Semigasawa Suguru calmly, his manner of speaking no longer feminine. “And your true name is Notorious I.C.E.. The ‘I.C.E.’ part means that you were a failure.”

“Name?” Hearing this, he snickered. “I don't need anything like that. Because, it looks like I've been living inside of a lie this whole

time. If you had to call me something... Yeah... Call me a wizard.” Placing the bowl to one side, he turned to Squeeze and opened his arms wide. “A wizard with a body covered in strange make-up. A Peppermint Wizard.”

He spoke as if in jest, tilting his head to one side. Squeeze couldn’t keep up with his pace and continued on indifferently.

“I still don’t know why I let you go back then... But I never expected you to trip the alarm that I’d placed just as a precaution. I thought it had been another malfunction, but you really did just blunder straight in...” His face then contorted into one of disgust. “Why’d you have to come back here? You managed to escape. You should have just stayed hidden...”

“Hmm?” His brow creased slightly. “Oh, so that means you didn’t have a grudge against me personally? Then I apologize,” he said, nodding to himself. “It seems like I just can’t help but tend toward these things. I never have the slightest intent of hurting people, but before I know it, all I’m doing is bad things to them. I did so to Norisuke, and I did so to Sonoko. And above all...to Rei.”

“So you did do it for that woman... You ate one of her cakes somewhere, didn’t you?” said Squeeze, his words seeming to writhe. “That’s right. Her memory’s being manipulated. Soon enough, she started beginning to think *your flavor* was one of her own. It was meant to be a continuation of your experiment, that is. Of course, being an insurance of sorts, she’s hardly been much of a priority. But she’s already lost sight of what her own flavor is now.”

“That’s a terrible humiliation.”

“It was unavoidable. There was no one apart from her who understood your flavor.”

“That’s not what I meant...” Here, for the first time, he visibly expressed something akin to hate. “I mean the fact that you’re calling something like that *my* flavor. I can’t have you lumping me together with that second-rate garbage.” He spoke assertively. “That goes for Rei too, of course. There’s no way something like that could be on her level. You really have been doing something pointless. I don’t know what this experiment of yours is, but that half-hearted attempt of a

flavor is just an incomplete mess, nothing more. If you were going to copy me, you should have left that up to Rei. I'm sure she'd have made something far better than anything I could."

Squeeze was speechless. The sensitive nature of Semigasawa Suguru within him acknowledged that it was just as he'd said. But unfortunately, that and his mission were two separate issues.

"...You asked me earlier what part I play. Let me answer that now: it's to kill you," he said quietly.

"Oh, really?" Again, he laughed. "I doubt you'll be able to do that, though."

"It's not a question of being able to or not. It's something that must be done."

Squeeze readied for combat—his attack, an invisible wave of force, created by an expulsion of compressed air from his special lungs. But it wasn't just any expulsion of air. It had an acoustic resonance within it so that the moment it came into contact with an object of a certain hardness, it would shake the object's molecular structure and tear it into shreds—a frightening "microwave²⁹ of air and sound."

That compression had begun. It would take just over three seconds to charge. As he'd survived a hit from him before, this time he'd punch him with a force incomparable to the last!

But despite being faced with this attack, he who called himself a wizard simply laughed.

"Like I was saying, that's not what I meant..."

The blast fired. His body took the full brunt of the impact. Blown away, a spray of blue blood diffused and danced through the air a second time. His body slammed against a refrigerator, sending the surrounding objects flying across the room, and then stopped.

He lay that way for a moment, but soon rose deliberately to his feet.

"Oof, that hurt..." he grumbled.

His whole body was wound-ridden, and he'd spilled a tremendous amount of blood, but he was still alive, and treating it as if it were nothing. His was a formidable life force.

However...faced with him in this state, Squeeze simply stood there in a daze.

"...Wh-what on earth?" he said, looking in a different direction.

"Here's your answer, Suguru. Or, what was it I should call you again? Squeeze?"

He stood up and dusted off his body.

"Ouch, that opened up some wounds."

And even throughout all this, Squeeze walked forward unsteadily, muttering to *himself*.

"Did I overdo it? Still... Even so, I can't believe he'd disappear without a trace..."

And then he walked straight past the blood-drenched man next to him.

He didn't see him. No, it wasn't even that. He'd rejected any perception of him, so that even though the sounds and smells were right there, he somehow simply did not turn that way.

"This is the reason why I managed to get away that time without anyone finding me, Squeeze. I'd been doing it unconsciously back then, but now I have full command of it," he said quietly. But his voice, too, failed to reach the combat-type synthetic human. "At this moment, I've become your pain. You're living your life averting your eyes from your own pain. And that's why you can't see me. No... You are seeing me, and you can hear me, and you should be feeling something too, but after that, there's just a compulsion to turn away from those feelings that you can't resist... And that's why I won't be seen by anyone. That's why no one will care. That's my ability--'to make the pain of others my own.' "

Even when he whispered all this right into his ear, Squeeze didn't turn his way, nor register the sigh that fell upon him. He simply muttered on.

"I never meant to go this far..."

"There's so much blood splattered here, that should be more than enough proof that I died, shouldn't it? That's why I made sure to take the hit. But it really did hit me hard... I guess you holding back a little was what saved me, though, huh."

He flicked Squeeze's forehead with the tip of his finger, and still, Squeeze appeared to remain completely oblivious. Even if he were to strangle him here, or stick a knife through his chest, he would likely die without ever realizing that fact.

No one would be able to stop him, and none would have the power to oppose him...so long as their hearts felt pain.

"Well, there is a much easier way to describe what this is. In a word, it's magic. No tricks, no smoke and mirrors... The real deal. Now then..."

He carried himself over to one of the refrigerators that was still intact, took out several ice-cream packs, then stuffed them into a portable ice box.

Even as he did this manual work, Squeeze simply tottered around. And even after the wizard had gone, he would continue to stay there for a while, absent-mindedly standing there on the spot.

...And so, like all things, does our story near its close.

* * * * *

“Haah...”

As she walked home at night, Kusunoki Rei was feeling despondent. Again, she’d yelled at one of her students for something minor. It had been one thing after another lately. She would start getting unreasonably angry and then, without realizing, suddenly snap. She was taking plenty of calcium, no joke, but it seemed that she just couldn’t calm herself down. Was there even anything she could do about it...?

“Haah...” She sighed again and, for no real reason, stopped to gaze at the night sky.

She felt like something was missing, like some part of her was lacking. No... it was something she’d had before; except, she’d unknowingly lost it somewhere along the way— or so it seemed to her. Even her passion toward her job was beginning to wane; it never used to be like this. What could she have been missing?

“...like to try one?” As Rei was lost in thought, an unusually carefree voice suddenly spoke next to her ear. Alarmed, she jumped back a step.

“Waah?!” She turned to look. Standing there was a lone jester who you might take for a sandwich man, wearing a friendly, approachable smile. In his hands was a sign scrawled with things like “New Product!” and a cooler.

“Hi there, ma’am! Can I interest you in one?” he said, shooting her a smile.



“W-what is this? Where did you spring up from?” Rei’s heart was still racing. She hadn’t thought there was anyone nearby until now, but, all of a sudden, there he was, standing there.

“Oh, come now, I’ve been standing here the whole time!” The jester was wearing peppermint-green makeup. On closer inspection, he was actually rather handsome.

...Huh?

Rei frowned. She'd seen this guy somewhere before...

"So, what do you say? This is our new ice cream—we'll be putting it on the market shortly. Think you could give it a taste?" said the jester to her casually.

It seemed, however, that he didn't recognize her. She must have been imagining it. Rei changed her attitude.

"...You're asking *me*? To taste that?" Her words were a little prideful. "I'll warn you; I don't hold back."

"Oh? Could that mean you're a professional, ma'am?"

"Well, I guess you could say that."

"In that case, I absolutely have to get you to try this. It's limited edition, after all." The jester opened the cooler and heaped a scoop into a cone. His words were full of confidence, but it didn't seem like that confidence was based on anything.

Thinking to tease this amateur a little by guessing the ingredients — they were guaranteed to be cheap things anyway — she took the ice cream and, acting uninterested, casually gave it a lick.

At that moment, her eyes widened.

"...What is this?"

"How is it? It's tasty, right?" he asked, giggling. But Rei was in no state to answer.

"Whoever made this... What were they thinking?"

"Come again?"

"How the hell can you sell ice cream that costs 100,000 yen a head to make?! There's no way!" she cried, astonished.

"I told you, it's limited edition," said the jester, continuing to chuckle.

"Even if you were to sell this as a limited run marketing campaign, you realize it's just going to have the reverse effect later on, right?"

Rei found herself moving closer, drawing herself up to the jester, but he simply beamed at her, and she suddenly returned to her senses.

"...W-well, I suppose there's no sense in telling an amateur like you this," she said, blushing slightly and stepping back.

She ate the ice cream in earnest now. It was, without a doubt, a

first-class product with top-tier ingredients. This wasn't something you'd eat out on the street. For some reason, Rei began to feel anxious.

...Even so, she couldn't shake the feeling that something like this had happened in the past. But, by then, she started to feel as if it wasn't something all that surprising... But it was only a feeling. There was no concrete memory or impression she could identify.

"Still, ma'am, you must have some really accurate taste buds there, huh!" commented the jester the moment he'd seen her finish the ice cream.

"Y-yeah, I suppose you could say that." The question helped Rei to regain a bit of composure.

"For people like you, I've got a very special product right here for you!"

"...Didn't you say the one from before was special too?"

"This one's the real deal, though! The genuine article! It's been specially made for you and you alone. Honest!" His tone sounded so frivolous that it lacked any credibility.

"I don't know about this..." Hearing the way he spoke to her, Rei started to feel that even the previous product might not have been such a special thing after all. He was giving off something of a con-artist vibe.

"I swear! The manufacturer faced demons lurking in the fires of hell and leapt into their cauldron just to make this! Such is the bravery of a knight who awaits the smile of his princess, bound by her melancholy curse!"

...She was starting to feel like she didn't care anymore.

"Fine. I'll eat it," said Rei half-dismissively and took it in her hand.

"Yes, ma'am! Thank you very much!" The jester opened his cooler box again, dished out what seemed to be at first glance a perfectly ordinary vanilla ice cream and handed it to her.

In that instant their fingers brushed, and the jester's body immediately jumped and trembled.

"What's wrong?"

"I-it's nothing. Anyway, please, go ahead."

“You’re not going to serve it? ...Looks like this one's still pretty plain, huh?”

“Plain things reveal plain truths. It always comes down to the basics.”

“The basics, eh...” Rei snorted.

“That’s right, the basics. Why is it that people started making sweets? Why do they continue to make them? ...It’s because they try to forget the pain that lies in the depths of their hearts, if even a little. And we, the failed wizards of fate, are always living within that rift...”

“What?”

The nonsense the jester had started spouting caused Rei to lift her head from the ice cream and stare at him. He simply smiled back, like always. Something still didn’t feel quite right, but regardless, she put her tongue to the extra-special ice cream.

It was your cheap, everyday fare, with really nothing at all special about it. Rei’s tongue could tell that easily. But...then why? Why was it that once she’d taken a bite, a tear had rolled down her cheek?

In that moment, she suddenly remembered everything.

Her parents, who she’d lost at an early age. The flavor of the failed cake that they’d made for her back when they were still alive.

Ah...

That’s right... How could she have forgotten? Wasn’t it those feelings that had gotten her to start making confectionery to begin with? To reclaim the joy that her parents had given her that time. It was never meant to have been something to advance her career or to lord over her students with...

“W-what does this...?” she started to ask, and in her ear someone whispered.

“It’s magic. Nothing special, really...”

She jerked her head up with a start, but there was no longer anyone there.

“W-where did you go?!”

Rei looked around hurriedly, unable to stay calm, while he remained right next to her. He was still smiling.

“Looks like I was finally able to find a flavor that you approve of.

You really are something, you know. You're the only one who's ever made me struggle this hard, and you're the only one that ever will."

Though he spoke, the words didn't reach Rei's ears — she just kept looking around. With a smile on his lips, he slowly began to move away from the spot. A smile on his lips...and yet his face was on the verge of tears. In such a state, and with a weary step, he shambled off. Up close, you would notice that, dotted here and there on his jester clothes, there were wounds still not fully closed, from which blue blood oozed out. It seemed that his heavy gait was half due to the pain of those wounds.

Soon, even the smile he'd forced the whole time faded, beginning to leave only a lingering haggardness. And there, before him in his path, stood a lone shadow.

"...A wizard, is it?"

The figure wore a black hat and was wrapped in a black cloak, more a strange pipe-shaped silhouette than a human.

It was Boogiepop.

"....." He looked back at the black hatted figure, and Boogiepop, as if glaring, stared him straight down.

"To make one's pain your own, and to possess a method with which to erase it... A fearsome power."

Boogiepop's voice was flat, with no discernible emotion. You couldn't even tell if they were a man or a woman.





“Not even the Towa Organization had realized the true horror of that power, but it is without a doubt at the center of this matter. It seems everyone was trying to take advantage of it, but on the contrary, they would, in fact, simply find themselves swept up in the sheer and uncompromising force of its current.”

He didn't answer. Boogiepop continued.

"People carry pain in their hearts, but it is because of this that they can move forward. If you erase that pain, then people can no longer advance. They try to run away from pain itself, and, not wanting to be hurt by anyone, they stop trying to reach out to others' hearts. And thus, the meaning of effort in every sense vanishes... Peaceful, yes, but there could be no more horrific end to the world than this. Though there is no patently immediate threat, the magnitude of its danger is on a level incomparable. Then, considering that imbalance, out of all those I have met until now, you might be the greatest 'enemy of the world'..."

"....."

Boogiepop's words were almost like a declaration, but he did not react.

"However we look at it, that makes you an 'enemy' I must defeat, doesn't it...?"

Boogiepop stared at him fixedly, with eyes cold like ice. He simply received that stare, showing no sign of a response. Eventually, Boogiepop sighed and faintly shrugged his shoulders.

"...You're an enemy. Or, you would be, normally. But each time that I appeared, I would again disappear...every time I actually met you in person. And now I finally see the reason for that."

"....."

"Because the one who had that power was *you*."

"....."

"This isn't going very well, is it? That power isn't the only thing that's imbalanced; it's the fact that the owner of that power — more than anything, more than anyone — wishes in direct opposition to it to get others to understand their pain. Honestly, none of this is straightforward at all..."

Boogiepop's expression was hard to describe; it was something asymmetrical, as if he were laughing...as if he were angry.

"That would be why you were desperately making ice cream. Am I wrong?"

"...Move."

At last, he spoke up and began to move forward, pushing the black hatted figure out of the way roughly. On shaky legs, he began to stagger away. At his back, Boogiepop called out.

“Hey, Wizard...”

But he did not stop, nor turn his head. Nevertheless, Boogiepop asked.

“What do you think of the world?”

“.....”

At this, he stopped. And for a short time, he just stood there. Was he searching for an answer to the question? Or was he trying to recall what he had said to others who’d asked him the same thing in the past? Whatever the reason, and to little surprise, he walked on.

“What will you do now?” asked the black hatted figure again to his back.

It was the final question. And to it, the jester replied curtly.

“None of your damn business.”

* * * * *

...And so, our story ends.

But frankly, it wasn’t much of a story now, was it? It was so fuckin’ incoherent, how’s anyone supposed to make heads or tails of it, eh? I mean, come on.

Hm? Who am I to say such things? “Captain Walker died, didn’t he?” you say? Hey, c’mon now. Throughout this whole shebang, since when did I ever say I was the Captain?³⁰ You wanna know who I am? Now, just hold your horses. Quit asking me all these stupid questions. More importantly, let’s talk about what happened after that.

...Well, I say “after,” but chasing after a guy like that with the kind of power he has? Impossible, even for a narrator. So, here’s a little something I just happened to think up that might help give you some closure. Heh heh heh.

Picture this... Let’s say you’re out traveling the world someplace. Where? Doesn’t matter. Anywhere you want. Let’s say you’re taking a leisurely stroll down the street.

Then, this street vendor approaches you. He’s on his own. But the

strange thing about him? You feel like he just sprung up out of nowhere.

And, with his weird-ass make-up, he would say, "Dear customer, how would you like to taste an ice cream that is out of this world?"

There's no way in hell you'd trust him. I mean, it's pretty easy not to. From his speech and his manner, he's the very picture of frivolity. How *could* you trust him?

"Sorry, but I can't stand ice cream. I've got really bad memories because of that stuff," you say with a grimace. To which he just laughs and says,

"Haha! I bet your parents told you off, telling you 'you'll go stupid if you eat stuff like that,' didn't they?"

This surprises you a little.

"...You sure know a lot. It's a little different than that, though. But...you're right that they got angry at me."

"Well then, you can relax. Because, this time, the ice cream will make you remember what you've forgotten."

"This time, huh?"

You're about to get angry at his glib remarks when you notice. You can't be certain, but you have the vague recollection that you've seen this guy somewhere before. It's at this point that your friend who's with you shouts out to you because you're falling behind.

"Ritsuko, what are you doing?"

"Yeah, just a sec!" you reply. "Sorry, I've gotta get going," you say to the vendor, and make to leave.

"Ah, but this was made especially for you, miss. If you don't eat it, I'll just have to dump the whole darn thing in the trash," he implored pitifully.

"Oh, if you insist."

It disgusts you, but, well, he doesn't seem all that much of a bad guy, so you think 'what the hell' and buy one. And once you eat it, you're knocked for six.

Unbelievable. You've never tasted ice cream this good before!

E-even compared to back then, this ice cream is so much more...more...!

That's what you think. And when you look up, you don't know how it could have happened, but the vendor seems to have vanished off the face of the earth... That's when your friend comes back looking puzzled and tilts their head.

"Huh? Ritsuko, when'd you go buy ice cream?"

"Hm? Oh, there was this street vendor here just a moment ago and —"

Your friend starts to look increasingly doubtful.

"What are you talking about? You were just standing there on your own spacing out..."

...and that's pretty much how it would play out.

In other words, it was just another story about a ghost manifesting in the world. I guess you're wondering why such a simple story needed such a long exposition. Well, that's probably because, in the end, he was a fool in everything he did, be it narrator or otherwise. Even when trying to tie up loose ends...

* * * * *

"...Shut up. I don't care," he muttered to himself, walking on unsteady legs.

He'd been hurt, forgotten by his entire past, forsaken even by a god of death, and yet still, he walked on.

He was crying.

Truly, those tears were the first tears he'd ever cried. He, who hadn't known how to react even when those close to him had left him, was now, finally, able to cry.

It was a terribly insignificant story, nothing more...

**Peppermint Wizard, or The Rise and Fall of a
Poor, Innocent Puppet, closed.**

Afterword--

“That” is not “Here”

People often tell you things like “You can’t do anything if you’re afraid of failure. Just give it a shot.” They can say what they want, but when you’re in a situation where you’re obviously going to fail, it really isn’t such an easy thing to do. It’s human nature. If that nature ends up being thought of as something bad, it could even go so far as to incite nuclear war: “Oh, it’s probably not going to be as bad as you think. Just go fire off a missile, see what happens.” And similar things to this have indeed happened in the past. The reason why it hasn’t happened yet is thanks to our fear of failure. You may think I’m talking nonsense, and that’s because I am, of course, talking nonsense. For real, though, why is it that people are so quick to say you shouldn’t be afraid of failure, huh? Taking it from someone who really has failed over and over again in the past, I strongly doubt that there’s “bravery in not fearing failure” or anything like that. Because failure really is incredibly crappy.

By the way, when someone continues to fail time and time again — and of course when I say this, this applies equally to me — it’s not that they aren’t afraid of failure. On the contrary, I think you could say that their fear of it runs far deeper than anyone else’s. So then, why is it that they’re constantly failing? It’s of course because they don’t know any other way. Anywhere you look, you’ll find people who will simply fail no matter what, and the reason for that is because the things around them are sealing off all other paths that would lead them out of failure. Plus, the fact that they’re so incredibly afraid of failure means they couldn’t even hope to imagine a way in which they wouldn’t fail. It’s a tragic thing indeed, but to these people that’s just the way the world works, and that fact’s hard to refute. They don’t want to fail, but there’s no way they can get by without failing. Or, more specifically, they don’t have a way *yet*. They never had one in the past, and if things keep on going the way they are, then there won’t ever be. So, for people like this not to fail, they need to start looking for something that they can’t even imagine themselves. Which

is why they cannot but fail.

In actuality, a new age can only be born from failures such as these. In the majority of cases, to bring about an age that has achieved tremendous change, an absurd number of people die for nothing. This was the case even in Japan during the Meiji Restoration (not to mention a far worse, more recent event, but I'll refrain from stating an opinion, as I don't know so much about it). Compared to these things, our humble personal failures feel trivial... is what people who've never had to deal with failure say. From the perspective of people who really have no choice but to fail, what this becomes is: "It makes no difference whether it's huge or minor — failure is awful." They hate it, and so they struggle. The more they struggle, the harder it is for things to go well... In fact, it's it people like these who are "searching for something that isn't there" that hold the key to the future of our world. But that fact isn't enough to save them... Because in the end, it doesn't change the fact that they're failing within that world.

So what, you ask? It's not really a big deal. That's just the way it is. And... I think that probably every one of us is one of those people who can't help but fail. No matter how blessed they believe themselves to be, and no matter how wretched and far removed from success they may be, we are in fact all deeply scarred by continuous failure, and I believe this as a nigh gospel truth. Having said that, we can't exactly escape from this. If we're going to fail, maybe we should at least try to aim for failure that's going to benefit our future selves and others. To fear failure, create a safety net, and repeat the same failures over and over again — maybe that's what true failure is. I guess in the end, life's just about trying our best. After saying all that, is this going to be the point where I finally say, "don't be afraid of failure"? Eh, I dunno. I'm out.

(Instead of this stuff, wouldn't it have been funnier writing about your own many failures in actual detail?)

(...Don't wanna. Anyway, it's fine like this.)

Translator's Afterword--

The Editor, the Decoder, and the Kheemer

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

—Hm? A translator's afterword? Who the hell does that?

I know, I know. Just bear with us, okay? It's our first project.

—Fine, fine... Who are you three anyway?

Kheem, Transcriber:

Hello! I'm Kheem. You may or may not know me as one of the admins of the Boogiepop Wiki. I had probably the most minimal role in this translation, to be honest. I was basically an editor, but it's not like what I was given needed that much work anyway, so it mostly felt like I was getting to read chapters earlier than everyone else. Which is something I can't complain about, of course.

The Decoder:

Well... If you had to give me a name, you could call me by my codename, The Decoder. Let me make one thing clear. I did not really translate. I merely guided the words down the right path.

—Wait, what? What does that even mean? Did you translate it or not?

The Decoder:

Words dance at the whims of fate. I was merely a puppet--a vessel--through which those words flow. And when such a time comes where the seas may swell and the surf dashes upon our newfound shore, then those words must cede to their ebb and flow. Nothing in this world is permanent. And how beautiful a thing it is, too...

—... Anyway, that's two. Who's the last guy?

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

Not to sound super important, but I'm Bistai, the guy who put all this together. I don't do as much work on it anymore, but I still do quite a bit. I've been trying to get this thing done for a little over a year now and, well, now I have. Or, well, we have. It's a weird feeling.

—A year, huh... is it really that important? Didn't you have better things to do?

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

Hahaha, I guess. But it was worth it. I don't regret any of the time I spent working on it. Back when the first Boogiepop anime came out, I could see the writing on the wall when it came to the series' state in the west. It looked pretty much DOA. All I could think at the time was "I refuse to let that happen. I'll carry this all on my back if I have to." I was that determined. And now here we are. I have more people helping out, and we're done with our first volume. In about a year no less, and we aren't planning on stopping.

—Hm? Do you really think you saved the series in the west on your own?

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

No, not even close, and it's not just 'cause we're working as a team to translate this. Everyone on the discord, on reddit, and on twitter have been a great help, but we're not there yet. Someday, I hope we can give Boogiepop the attention it deserves.

—Huh, Anyway, you said something about not planning on stopping. Does anyone else have something to say about that?

Kheem, Transcriber:

I definitely want for us to get to a point where an English speaker could read all of these great stories. The best-case scenario would still be for Seven Seas to continue officially publishing the series, but I feel like that's too much to hope for as of now. So, I plan to continue helping with this fan translation for the rest of the foreseeable future, even if I can't do that much to help.

—Well, seeing as you're just along for the ride anyway apparently, what are your thoughts on this volume?

Kheem, Transcriber:

Being in charge of the wiki, I already

knew many things about the plot of this book going in from all the research I did. Even so, I enjoyed this book tremendously. From the first six, my favorite up till now has been volume 4, Pandora, but I feel like I at least like this book as much as that one, if not more. *I'll miss my green ice cream boy.*

(ಥ_ಥ)

—What about you Mr. Decoder? Any particular part of the story you felt you really connected with?

The Decoder:

(Smile) Are you sure that's not a leading question? Tosuke's story is our story, and the reverse is also true. Sometimes we find solace in our suffering, and we revel in our self-pity because it's the easy thing to do. But easy things cannot be complex, and we need a certain degree of complexity if we're to ensure humanity's future. It's true that sometimes we need to forget our pain briefly to live and function as competent human beings, but innocence and wisdom are two opposites ends on the spectrum of life, and we cannot help but tend towards one. I suppose what I mean here is that we should always look within ourselves from time to time and make sure that something has not been eating us unawares from within.

—Well, we're up to 7 pages on this stupid thing, so last question. This is for everyone. What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

Bistai, Editor in Chief:
Kheem, Transcriber:

Hm... probably cookies and cream.

Why, peppermint ice cream, of course! (well, mint chocolate chip, actually, but what's the difference). I'm also partial to bubblegum flavor.

The Decoder:

My favourite ice cream...? Well, of course. That's... It's...

—Yes?

The Decoder:

...That's strange. It should have been

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

Kheem, Transcriber:

The Decoder:

Kheem, Transcriber:

The Decoder:

Kheem, Transcriber:

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

Kheem, Transcriber:

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

Kheem, Transcriber:

The Decoder:

Kheem, Transcriber:

Bistai, Editor in Chief:

mint chocolate just like his specialty, but no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to recall the flavor...

Okay, while you're thinking on that, really Kheem, bubblegum?

Hmm how should I respond to that... extol the virtues of bubblegum flavor. ik right? its great!

All the flavour without the chewiness.

Indeed. Oh, how many more lines are we shooting for btw?

I'm willing to fill another page. More than that would be too much.

I think that'd already be a bit much.

Yeah. I agree. It's just the upper limit.

I was envisioning like, half a page more at most.

We'd have our fill by then. best not to engorge.

Indeed.

By the way, who's that interviewer supposed to be anyway?

BGM "D.I.Y."

from Peter Gabriel 2 (Scratch)



See you next
time in
Boogiepop Countdown:
Embryo Erosion





Notes

[←1]

Toisora on discord brought to my attention that this section seems to be related to a book Kadono confirmed he was working on in 2010. The Book is titled "The Soldier of Ruin" and would feature Akio from chapter 4 of Boogiepop and Others. At the very least, this means that the Akio mentioned in this section is the same Akio from the first book.

[←2]

The word used here is 'Itadaku,' a more informal variant of the well-known phrase "Itadakimasu." Which means to give thanks for everything that went into the food.

[←3]

Captain Walker is most likely a reference to The Who's 1969 rock opera *Tommy*. In it, there is a character named Captain Walker, who is the father of the main character.

[←4]

Technically, the word crucifix in English only refers to the religious symbol; however, Japanese has a word for crosses specifically made for people to be crucified on. The word crucifix is being used in this translation to let the sentences flow better. Just keep in mind that whenever you see the term crucifix here, it's not necessarily related to the Christian symbol.

[←5]

You might be wondering what the hell he's talking about. Well, the original line here was 手術台の上のミシンどころ, which is a reference to a Japanese saying. It's hard to translate literally, but it basically refers to two completely different things forming something beautiful because they're so different. I can't exactly translate it literally, so I came up with an English analog. This is what came to mind. Apparently, nacho cheese and Oreos taste really good together. Or so I'm told.

[←6]

If you want to know how the clown is hung from the cross, so do I. It's not made clear in the original. I assume the clown's hands are nailed to it, but he very well could be hanging by a rope as well.

[←7]

Originally 女子高生, this word is a shortening of the term 女子高校生, which literally means female high school student. Though, it has a lot of connotations aside from that. The kanji in the word roughly mean "girl who is at the highpoint of her life," which is the connotation the word normally takes. Basically, girls at this age are said to be "at their most beautiful." Makes you think of the Boogiepop legend, doesn't it? Kadono sometimes flips between using 女子高校生 and 女子高生; however, he exclusively uses 女子高生 in this book. 女子高生 is the preferred term in modern Japanese though (even during the turn of the century,

which is when this was written), so you can decide whether this usage is significant or not.

[←8]

The word used here, 幸せ, is a word that extends beyond just plain joy or happiness. The word commonly refers to a happiness that implies a person is truly satisfied with their life. Using the term “true happiness” as a translation sounds cheesy, but she’s basically saying that the shop’s ice cream makes a person’s life worth living, so it’s fitting. It also gets across how arrogant she’s being.

[←9]

In case it’s unclear, it seems like this is Captain Walker talking. The term 様(sama) is affixed to his name – which is a pretty arrogant way of referring to yourself – and he uses the term てめえ(temee) for Teratsuki (which is very vulgar). Going by this, it’s pretty clear that Captain Walker’s the speaker here. Normally we wouldn’t translate -sama, but he’s being so arrogant we thought it’d be better if he was referring to himself as “the great Captain Walker.”

[←10]

These are literally translated as “Tasty Travels around Japan” and “This Nice Little Place I Spotted in Town.” I changed them a bit to sound more like catchy feature titles and to be a little less corny. Because I’m unoriginal. I made them references to really old TV and film.

[←11]

The first line in this section, as you may have noticed, is the same one from the images at the beginning of the novel. I check to make sure they were the same line, and they are. So yes, this reporter is the same one as in that image. I changed a bit of the later part of the line to make it flow better and more like what an entertainer would say.

[←12]

For those that may be unaware, Yakiniku is literally grilled meat. It originally referred to American barbecue, but after it was influenced by Korean barbecue, it kinda became its own thing. Yakiniku places typically serve the meat uncooked and provide a grill to cook it on yourself.

[←13]

The phrase used here, 「何になさいますか？」 is a very common one for waiters and waitresses to use when taking someone’s order. Though, it’s actually pretty vague out of context, and since Sonoko doesn’t have any context at first, we went with something a bit vaguer in English to make the scene feel better.

[←14]

As I’m sure you could already guess, Squeeze is another music reference. It comes from the name of Velvet Underground’s final studio album. Apparently, the album was very poorly received, and the writer for pretty much all the songs, Doug Yule, described it as “the blind leading the blind.” Don’t know if that’ll be relevant or not.

[←15]

This may not be intentional, but, knowing Kadono and his admiration for JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, it probably is. Marco D'Ambrosio is the name of the composer on the original JoJo's Bizarre Adventure OVA series from 1993. Because of course it is.

[←16]

I'm typesetting everything he says in that accent in a different, stilted font to make the delineation between his normal speech and the accent clearer. In the original Japanese, everything he said was in Katakana, so it's kinda hard to read. I feel like this gives a similar experience, but I didn't want to go too overboard. Just be thankful it's not all in comic sans.

[←17]

Besides the obvious adult implications that it has to Europeans, Spunky could refer to a character from Rocko's Modern Life. Though, I have my doubts as to if Kadono would watch and like something like that enough to put a reference to it in his novel. It's probably just related to the word 'Spunky's actual definition.

[←18]

Notorious I.C.E. is a portmanteau of two rappers. The first being the Notorious B.I.G., also known as Biggie Smalls. The second could either be Vanilla Ice or Ice Cube; though, given this novel's focus on ice cream, my money's on Vanilla Ice.

[←19]

What I translate as 'ghost' and 'phantom' here is the same word in Japanese. What Nonomura is talking about involves more than just what we consider ghosts, so I use the word 'phantom.' However, at certain times here it makes more sense to translate it as 'ghost.'

[←20]

The Former Managing Director speaks very femininely. This could just mean that the person's a woman; however, based on how the dialogue is written, this could actually be Semigasawa. Whether this is actually the case or not is unclear.

[←21]

This is a Japanese proverb. The original is 夏草や兵どもが夢の跡. Literally, it reads: "Summer grass and other such places are where noble soldiers dream." This is an English translation of the proverb I found online. The site I found gave no source to the translation.

[←22]

A toy consisting of a figure balancing on a single, narrow point by using multiple weights stretching down and out to the side. It's kinda hard to search because there just so happens to be a Dragon Ball character with the same name, so 99% of my google searches just turned up him. I had to mention this 'cause it was a pain in the ass to get any information on it.

[←23]

I'm sure 90% of the people reading are going to know this, but in case you don't, a Shinigami is a Japanese god of death. They're like the western idea of the grim reaper.

[←24]

This is from the first novel, but that's not why I'm bringing it up. I just wanted to give a bit of info on it. Remember the TL note on the term high school girl (If not, see act.1 part 3)? Well, the Boogiepop rumor kinda plays into that. If high school is considered the high point of a girl's life, it stands to reason that a girl would be killed by Boogiepop in high school. I just wanted to bring it up since it's mentioned here. You can decide how relevant/irrelevant it is to the series.

[←25]

This is in reference to some old beliefs about the divinity of foxes in Japanese folklore. Kitsune are fox spirits that have supernatural abilities. The ones Nonomura refers to here are the yako. These foxes are mischievous and sometimes malicious. They are said to have the ability to possess people as well as enchant them into doing things.

[←26]

This most likely refers to the Japanese calendar system. Era's are determined by an emperor's rule. When a new emperor takes the throne, a new era begins. Each era is given a name, or 年号(nengo). This is like the Japanese version of being a Millennial or a Gen-X-er.

[←27]

Meal Ready to Eat. In America, this refers to meals served by the military on deployment; though, there are many similar things you can buy in Japan. To make these, you usually just need to add hot water to serve them.

[←28]

In America, we don't usually think of mice being particularly work-minded rodents (we give that to hamsters), but the mice mentioned here are known for being industrious in Japan.

[←29]

Microwaves cook food by using electromagnetic waves to vibrate the molecules in food, producing heat. Squeeze is basically saying that he does the same thing, but through matching his soundwaves with the object's resonant frequency.

[←30]

This line was pretty contentious for us. Japanese has a tendency to leave out the subject of a sentence, and the Act 1 Captain Walker sections tend to use Captain Walker's name in the 3rd person. However, in his introduction, Captain Walker very clearly said "My name is Captain Walker." Therefore, I think it's supposed to be ambiguous what parts were the Captain and what parts were this narrator. I'll leave it to you to decide.